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FORECLOSURE AND OTHER ESSAYS

A Creative Non-Fiction Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Derick Brandon Strode

September 2012

FORECLOSURE AND OTHER ESSAYS

Date Recommended Sept 14, 2012

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Dean, Graduate Studies and Research

Date

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Student writers of creative non-fiction take at least six literature courses to meet their Master of Arts requirements. First off, I owe thanks to Dr. Kelly Reames, Dr. Elizabeth Weixel, and Dr. Elizabeth Weston—my faculty—who exposed me to new works of literature over these past several semesters. Without the readings, conversations, and challenging thinking they put me up to, I would not have found quite the inspiration to write my own pages with such deliberation.

Early into the program, I was unsettled between the literature and creative writing route. Two writing faculty members made this choice obvious to me through their teaching. Ms. Debra Marquart, visiting faculty from Iowa State University during the summer of 2010, hosted the best writing workshop I've been involved in. If I ever teach writing myself, I hope to approach my own teaching with the passion, reflective critique, and understanding that she was able to bring daily for three hours to her pupils for three straight weeks. Dr. Dale Rigby is the other. Dale has challenged my thinking as a writer with every page I've written, always pushing me to experiment, take risks, and choose the most honest voice, even though it's not always the easiest to let out.

Lastly, I have my family to thank. It's true: I whine when I have writing hanging over my head (I think it's a part of my process). My wife, Cameron, has been the patient recipient of most of these whines. It's her, "Do it, fool, and stop-your-bitchin'-oh-by-the-way-I-love-you" attitude that has kept me on track to write something I am proud of. My mother has been a constant source of information and inspiration. I have asked her to wait until I complete the program to read my thesis—which is really about far more than

my father; it's about her too—and she has patiently obliged. Finally, Dad, I could never ask how you felt about me writing about you. I have always wondered if you would feel exploited if you knew. I hope you wouldn't. You were a good man, Pops. I wrote these pages as a testament to you, and as a way to somehow cope with losing you so early.

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FORECLOSURE AND OTHER ESSAYS

Derick B. Strode

December 2012

93 Pages

Directed by: Dr. Dale Rigby, Dr. Kelly Reames, Dr. David Bell

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

My dad had early onset Alzheimer's disease. I first knew something was wrong with him in 1995. He was 49 then, and I was just about to start the eighth grade. That's the summer his company backed him into a corner and told him to quit or be fired. He had worked there 14 years. They said his behavior was changing, and they thought he was doing it on purpose. It took seven years to get an actual diagnosis. The doctors looked for everything. They just thought he was too young.

I've relied on materials found in my parents' house from those days. But I've also let my imagination run, and added some forms of my own. Besides, isn't life just one series of what actually happened and then the years we spend looking backward at our own memories trying to sort it out? This is my Dad's story. And, it's my story too.

McLaughlin Young Group
EXECUTIVE ASSESSMENT
CONFIDENTIAL REPORT

Employee *Darrell Strobe*
Company *Country Oven Bakery*
Interview Date *July 21, 1993*

Personal History *Darrell Strobe is a 46-year old native of Cave City, Kentucky. Both of his parents are dead. His father, who died at 89, was a farmer. His mother, who died at 85, was a homemaker. Each parent had previous marriages and Darrell was the only child born to them. He had five half brothers and six half sisters. Darrell graduated from Caverna High School and spent one year at Lindsey Wilson Junior College. He has taken courses from Western Kentucky University and has 43 credit hours. Darrell has been married for twenty years and he and his wife have one daughter and one son.*

Work History *Darrell was raised on a farm and did a lot of summer tobacco work while he was in high school. He also worked part time at a Texaco station. After high school, he became an assistant manager there for one year and farmed at the same time. In 1970, he was hired in production at Firestone Textiles. Subsequently, he became a lift truck operator, a receiving clerk and supervisor of the receiving department/supply room. In 1981, he joined Country Oven Bakery when it opened in Bowling Green as a supervisor in shipping.*

Philosophy of Life *When growing up, Darrell had two brothers around until he was six, but really he was raised alone in a highly religious United Baptist home. All friends of his parents were very much like his parents.*

Personal Impact *Darrell is a large, well-built individual. He speaks slowly and deliberately. He has a nice smile and appears to be a good person but is non-assertive. He takes a long time to make his point.*

Employee *Derick Strobe*
Company *Lehman, Singer, and Rossman*
Interview Date *February 4, 2004*

Personal History *At 22, Derick Strobe is the youngest person in the Billings department. He grew up just a few miles outside of Bowling Green, Kentucky and stayed in his hometown for college at Western Kentucky University. He graduated with an English degree in May 2003. He studied abroad during his junior year in London where he was classmates with a girl from Cincinnati. After getting back to the USA, they started a long-distance courtship that led to him moving to Cincinnati to be with her in September 2003. His father and mother just moved into Bowling Green. His father was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's disease a couple of years ago. He has one older sister and a nephew.*

Work History *Lehman, Singer, and Rossman is Derick's first job out of college. He started in September 2003 in a Billings Specialist position. In our interview, he disclosed right away that he wishes he was using his English degree in his work, and called his job "monotonous" and the work of the law firm "an out-of-touch paper factory." He worked for the United States Postal Service during college and on the grounds of a golf course during high school.*

Philosophy of Life *Derick's Mom and Dad took him and his sister Michelle to a United Baptist Church all through childhood. But in college, Derick moved away from those beliefs. He said he is volunteering with the Kerry campaign and asked me during our interview if I am a registered Ohio voter. He seemed unusually upset that his work at Lehman, Singer, and Rossman contributes to foreclosures.*

Personal Impact *Derick is tall and skinny. He speaks with a nasal tone, but without the usual Kentucky accent. Sometimes he struggles to find just the right word when he's talking. When questioned about this, he said he hopes this is because he wishes to be more poetically precise, but worries this could be genetics starting its cruel trick on him.*

McLaughlin Young Group, 5925 Carnegie Blvd, Suite 350, Charlotte, NC 28209

A human capital consulting firm that helps people become more productive so their companies are more profitable.

Creativity People like Darrell tend to be risk adverse. Moreover, he appears quite rigid and far too conservative and respectful of traditional ideas to be creative. People like him tend to tolerate routine and frustrating jobs and may be resigned to difficult conditions. He will have difficulty letting go of present attachments and embracing new ones. He may also be able to bear many kinds of feelings that are disturbing and unpleasant. He will be confident in what he has been taught to believe and will accept the tried and true. He will be cautious in compromising in regard to new ideas. He may oppose and postpone change and will be inclined to go along with tradition whether in religion, politics, work, or intellectual thought.

Initiative Obviously, from the preceding remarks, he will not have great initiative. He works from 7:30 to 4:30. He resides on a 3-1/4 acre farm that takes four and a half hours to mow. Obviously, people like him wear their conservatism like a suit of quiet clothes. He may come across old-fashioned and will lack originality and a failure to keep pace with ordinary relations.

Problem-Solving Ability Darrell will have a strong proclivity for self-observation and evaluation and a desire to reduce cognitive dissidence and a preference for maintaining self-respect and being positively regarded by others. He will take pride in living up to his self-ideals but will rarely experience moments of joyful spontaneity. Instead, he will constantly monitor the correctness of his behavior and will be overly concerned about social appearance. People like Darrell do not tend, therefore, to enjoy themselves. Their self-preoccupation results in a deficit of unconditional self-regard, and as a consequence, perfectionism.

Leadership Darrell is a perfectionist and probably does best as an individual contributor. Psychometrically, we would not think of him as a particularly decisive leader.

Developmental Needs It is probably prudent for Country Oven Bakery and for Darrell to take a hard look at whether he is in the best situation at this time given his personality profile.

Creativity People like Derick are sometimes misunderstood. He comes off kind of square, appearing serious most of the time. He said that he doesn't always fit in—even with his girlfriend's friends. He may have a confidence problem. He is having trouble letting go of his hometown and worries that his family needs his help now that his Dad is getting worse. He says his creativity comes through better on paper than in conversation, and he added again, as if to make sure I wrote it down, that "there is no room for creativity in [his] job."

Initiative Derick worries that he's over-committed to his job and appears angry about the forced overtime. He said it's been four months now and this is "not what [he] moved up here for." On first appearance his quiet demeanor appears to mask the frustration he is feeling towards the firm's management. He will lack the drive to assist the company if this attitude is not altered.

Problem-Solving Ability Derick said that though he had talked to his supervisor about methods to get the department's workload down and end the overtime hours, "they didn't want to fix the problem." Derick comes off angry that he can't contribute to decisions at work. People like Derick have a strong proclivity to take control, even when they aren't in a position to. Derick is struggling with some cognitive dissonance. He says he wants to keep his job so he can stay near his girlfriend and that he is enjoying getting to know the city. But he also says he wants to help take care of his father and find a way to use his degree.

Leadership Derick is organized in his work and has been a productive contributor to the department's backlog. But he thinks critically about what he does and what value it has. He challenges his boss and his colleagues sometimes, and he says they don't react well to this. Psychometrically speaking, he may be prone to dissidence.

Developmental Needs It would be prudent for Lehman, Singer, and Rossman to carefully review Derick very soon. Given this assessment, his disposition with the firm needs to be addressed.

Memo: for the Darrell Strode file

From: Leon Carroll

Date: September 14, 1994

I had a conversation today with Darrell in regard to his job performance. Darrell has failed to perform satisfactorily in the following areas since his assignment to Shipping in May 1994: time management, recognizing priorities, team meetings, regulatory compliance, purchased product. I opened the conversation by asking Darrell how he considered his performance. He responded by saying, "I don't think I'm doing a good job at all." I told him I was pleased that we agree that his performance was not up to expectations. If he had felt that he was doing a satisfactory job, then this meeting might have come as a surprise to him and our conversation might have ended differently.

I spent the day of my move in a florescent-hued hospital waiting room. Michelle was down the hall in labor, Mom standing at her side. I was tasked with watching Dad so he wouldn't wander off through the hospital corridors—or worse, outside—and get lost. Mom came to the waiting room periodically to give us an update. Report data included time between contractions, the latest word on epidurals, and which nurses were the nice ones. When Mom wasn't there, Dad and I sat in the quiet. There was a TV on mute hanging from a black metal arm into the room. It had paced the morning into afternoon—the *Price is Right* first, then the Midday news, and now *Guiding Light*.

I was thinking about my move, the new job I was starting tomorrow, and what it would be like to live so close to Shannon. Dad sat there with a Styrofoam cup of water in

his hand. He had hardly said a word all day. He scratched the cup with his thumb and little white flakes were accumulating on his pant leg like a snow flurry.

The room was messy. Coffee was burning in a tired pot in the corner. Sugar was spilled on the table around it. There were some pink packs of Sweet-N-Low left carelessly on the floor. Copies of *People*, *US Weekly*, *Golf Digest*, and *Conde Nast* had been tossed onto chairs. News in hospitals appears only in bursts padded by expansive droughts of waiting. When news comes, there's no time to re-shelve magazines.

The room had started out full that morning, but as babies were born, waiting families left one-by-one, until it was just Dad and I.

Out in the hospital parking lot, my car sat waiting. My backseat was heaped with still-on-the-hanger clothes that I had grabbed in armfuls and carried out the front door this morning—the same clothes that got me through college—a mix of t-shirts, polo shirts, and blue jeans. In the backseat floorboard was my computer, padded with the bedding I had stripped off in a messy bunch. I was almost packed up. One birth, one last run by the house to grab a few more things, and then I'd be off.

I was going to Shannon. After a year of a long-distance relationship, alternating the three-and-a-half-hour drive between Cincinnati each weekend with her, I was going to bolt as soon as my nephew was here.

The job that I was starting was not ideal. I had wanted a job where I could use my degree. That summer, I thought about publishing, but the one house I knew of in Cincinnati wasn't hiring a fresh-out-of-school-no-experience like me. I applied to a company that mass produced textbooks and educational products. They sent me a

postcard with a printed signature on it thanking-me-but-no-thanks'ing-me for applying. But the one job I had wanted the most was with the Cincinnati Visitor's Center. They were hiring for someone to help with marketing, and I thought it would be a great way to use my skills while also learning more about my new area. They never acknowledged my application, even when I followed up with a phone message at the HR director's desk.

I put in a lot of applications, submitted a lot of résumés, and learned that a new graduate didn't get to be picky. I browsed the classifieds in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and online job databases, submitting applications to every posting that didn't sound too good to be true.

I got two job offers in mid August. One was at a call center where I was going to have to work evenings and one weekend day every two weeks. It paid \$10.50 an hour. The other was from a law firm downtown as a billings specialist. The pay was \$14 an hour and it was an 8-to-5, Monday-to-Friday gig. The choice was obvious. Not only was the pay better, but this job ensured there would be time to spend with Shannon. I arranged an apartment and set a move date: September 1, 2003—Labor Day.

The past year of my life had become blissful weekends with Shannon separated by five-day intervals spent finishing up my senior year and working evenings at a job at the post office. On the weekends, I felt my blood pulse in my veins. We made long-distance work. Two days out of every seven we were together; the other five days we counted down to the next weekend, promising each other that it wouldn't be long now until we could be together every day. The time in between weekends was a dead space. In the

hospital waiting room, I thought about the end of this long-distance era. Tomorrow the rest of my life was starting. I would be living in Cincinnati with her. Leaving work in the afternoon, coming home, and sharing dinner every evening. No more waiting every week. No more living for the weekend. Just living, starting tomorrow.

I listed the last few things I needed to pack into the car—the toothbrush and contact case I had left on the bathroom counter that morning, the three boxes left in my room, the clothes in the dryer, a snack for the road. I planned out what I would wear for my first day. I rehearsed the plan. Tomorrow, I would wake up at 6 AM. I would get ready for work. I would catch the 7:22 bus to downtown, ride an elevator to a sixth floor, and report by 8 AM.

And then an interruption came from a round speaker mounted into the ceiling tiles, amongst the tubular florescent bulbs, a lullaby. My nephew was there, and I was in the moment. I held him five minutes after he was born. Wrapped in a blanket. His skin wet. Not crying now while all of us did. Dad stood behind Mom, regarding the baby, smiling, but choosing not to hold his new grandson. A flake of Styrofoam was wedged under his thumbnail.

Memo: Darrell Strobe Personnel File

Re: Performance Problems

From: Leon Carroll

Date: April 21, 1995

When Darrell came into work, I asked him what happened to the instructions for loading the frozen Italian product. Did he not remember our conversation for loading bread? Did he not stress to Larry about using the product for Batesville and getting the load out

as soon as possible? Darrell just dropped his head and said he had not followed up on the instructions and thought Todd Milner had put “cut” notes on the Cincinnati and Louisville loads. I told Darrell that this was “unbelievable”—“what else could I have done to make sure he made the plan go?” He said, “Nothing—you told me everything. I just goofed up.”

When I drove away from the house, the loneliness fell hard on me. Here I was: a new college graduate, my twenty-second birthday a couple weeks away, a brand-new uncle. I backed out of the driveway and took a last look at Mom and Dad’s house. A new construction on a cul-de-sac. All the homes in this neighborhood mirrored each other—brick façade, garage, and a single Bradford Pear Tree per yard placed uniformly to the left of each home. The new house was small, but neat. I left the porch light on and it amplified the red geraniums on each side of the front door. Down the road, some neighbors were celebrating the close of summer by setting off the last of their 4th of July fireworks in the middle of the street.

My nephew’s toes hadn’t even uncurled when I left the hospital. He was 45 minutes old when I left Dad there with Mom, hugging them bye and us all an emotional wreck. Kissing Michelle’s forehead—the salty, exhausted skin of a new mother. I held Dad in a long hug. He felt as strong as ever. Mom made a big fuss about me leaving. She cried and said, “I’m going to miss you,” and “This is so hard,” a dozen times.

It had been easy for me to walk out of the hospital, saying goodbye to them. But it was harder to go back to the house. As I got in the car, I felt the need for fanfare to go along with my true departure. I had lived with them all through college. This was it—I was leaving the nest.

The last few boxes were stuffed into the trunk of my car. The sun a ripe September grapefruit behind the house. The driveway empty. No waving parents. No one running down the street after me in a grand send-off. Just red geraniums and a no-one-home-now porch light. I drove three and a half hours north to Cincinnati, rehearsing the plan again—the perfect first-day-on-the-job tie, the bus shelter at Buttermilk Pike to the second downtown stop, Rebecca Fritz, Human Resources, the sixth floor, 8 AM, coming home to Shannon tomorrow afternoon. But now I was also thinking about being a long-distance uncle and a long-distance son.

The mornings that followed were the mornings of the 17X. The same commuters had ridden this bus for years. They passed their commute in jovial chatter with one another, the same school-bus-fraternity-crowd that I had never fit into. They carried their lunches in plastic bags from Nordstrom's and Macy's. I was the skinny kid with the necktie—the one that got off at the Cincinnati Bell stop, the one who sat by himself writing in his journal. Those were the chilled fall mornings when fog blossomed up out of the Ohio River.

Cincinnati in the morning when the bus rounds the cut-in-the-hill:

the Carew Tower, a 49-floor art deco masterpiece, the early model for the Empire State Building, the sun plays with the yellow bricks, a dozen satellites send off and receive from the roof; the Roebling Suspension Bridge, the architect's predecessor for the Brooklyn Bridge (in this old, industrial town, everything is the architectural kid sister to something that went on to be great), those cables

*unspooled the year after the Civil War ended, the iron trusses of its floor still
Rainman-humming under the morning tires of commuters crossing back and
forth, if I could only hear the bridge over the bus's engine, I might hum just at the
right tone so no one could hear me; far away, Eden Park on the hill above
downtown, its fountain spewing a jet of water into the sky, quiet in the park still at
this hour in the halls of the art museum, in the greenhouses in the botanical
gardens; and visible in the cross section of Walnut Street for just a flash now as
the bus rolls on past a Catholic church, just there in the throng of concrete and
steel beam structures of banks and firms, the Mercantile Center, my building, the
sixth floor, an acre of cubicles, my station, those files, those helpless names, their
homes and dreams. But not yet. For now this fog. This beautiful grey stratus
rising up from the memories of summer days in the still-warm river, the
speedboats and the nostalgia-offering steamships that ran day-trippers up and
down past the skyline all summer long gone now, their wake that bounced across
the water in little wavelets calmed, but the river still breathing out the warmth of
those days, out of its muddy, brown lungs. This fog is an effigy of the August heat.
The barges are moored to the banks down there now, they must be resting on the
warm glassy surface somewhere beneath the Roebling Bridge like every morning.
But in this steam bath, nothing except shades of grey that transverse a spectrum
into glowing orange, where the vapor rises off in wisps, swirling past the bus
window now in the morning sun. Up above the summer humidity gone, the air is
so dry and blue, like two September skies ago, and now the skyscrapers stand up*

against the crisp air. And now my stop, my job, this corporate life that I've adopted.

The job was with Lehman, Singer, and Rossman. Those were the three chief lawyers of a 140-man fleet of unnamed lawyers that made up the practice. They represented banks' actions on down-on-their-luck people and families—foreclosures and bankruptcies (that was it, nothing more). I was one of twelve people in this giant factory of legal procedure, just a workman on the assembly line of paper bureaucracy, who collected their fees. I worked on the sixth floor as a billings specialist (“specialist” here a play-professional word for billing clerk or billing boy). The youngest employee.

Cloth walls mounted on a metal frame—my cubicle—where I thumb-tacked a photo of a newborn baby boy wrapped up in a blanket, a smiling grandmother, and a baby's grandfather who looked off center of the camera lens, all standing huddled in a hospital hallway. A metal desk. A computer and spreadsheets. The lawyers worked upstairs on other floors. They gave me an electronic access card that opened the doors to the sixth floor but none of the other ones—as if there were secrets upstairs, as if I were not to be trusted. I worked at this firm for eight months, preparing bills for thousands of dollars that I mailed off to Countrywide and Bank of America and dozens of other big banks. I never met Lehman, Singer, Rossman, or a single other attorney.

Country Oven Bakery Management Performance Appraisal, Date: *February 14, 1991*
Employee: *Darrell Strobe*, Position: *Area Supervisor*, Summary Evaluation: *Good*

Performance Commentary: Darrell uses a “personal” approach when dealing with his employees. By using team meetings, he shares line effectiveness and solicits ideas from his workers on how the lines can produce product in a more efficient manner.

They called him Double D at work back before it started. A big guy. Darrell weighed 280, but he told his small kids that it was all muscle. For the most part, he was right. He was overweight, sure, but Double D was stronger than he was heavy. At home, I watched him swing a weed-eater around the yard like it was a baton, watched him move furniture across the living room like he was moving empty cardboard boxes, and watched him beat eggs on Saturday mornings so fast that his arms looked like a boxer’s warm-up at the punching bag in the gym. I wondered if I would ever grow up to be that strong.

He went bald early. His high school yearbook picture stands as the proof. A patch of thick hair in the center surrounded by a U-shaped forehead on a black-and-white page. By his mid-twenties, his head was a slick eggshell. It must have bothered him. After he forgot how to talk, Mom found an army-green electronic pulse hair-loss tool that had belonged to Dad and showed it to me. She had started going through the boxes that survived the basement cleanout from when they left their old house.

The week he lost his job, the house that we had lived in for ten years went up for sale. This had been their dream home. Mom had drawn the original plans on graph paper at the kitchen table, dreaming of big porches. Once built, Dad had filled the corners of the unfinished basement with his pack-rat tendencies. For twelve years, the basement had been his den and his collection of memories piled higher. But as they moved to the new place, Mom knew it couldn’t all go. Junk dealers paid her \$1,000 to

take a heaping trailer away from our basement the day we moved with whatever they could pile into it.

She had always regretted letting his stuff go, and now there was a sense of history in these things that survived the loot and made it to the new house. Each piece was a fragment of Dad's life. I imagined that if I could get each piece back and arrange them just perfectly, that I could tell the whole story of Dad's life like a play-by-play.

Dad saved even the things he shouldn't. Instead of recycling glass soda bottles at the local Houchen's supermarket, he piled empty Nehi and Ski bottles in crates and waited for the day that he might find a use for them. His clothes were always a decade--if not two--behind current styles. He told me a hundred times, "Why throw something out if it's still got good use in it?" His voice full of sincerity. And so it was with his clothes that until they went ragged, he continued to wear them.

Today my Mom has a picture of she and my Dad taped to her refrigerator. It's near sundown, and they are standing facing west on Panama City Beach in Florida. The sun is casting an orange glow on their faces and on the towers of beachside hotels that line the Gulf. A strip of white sand stretches behind them. Another beach-goer snuck into the picture, standing in the surf up to her shins, the water washing in around her feet, an unknown lady, hands on her hips, watching the sea. The land arcs out to the south in the photo, curving out to where the land and sea meet at a point on the horizon. Though taken in the early nineties, Dad wears a polyester polo shirt that places him curiously in another era.

The hair-loss tool was from the mid-60s. He probably had this during his days at Lindsey Wilson College, when he was nineteen. I imagine him on an evening in 1965, sitting in a dorm room in Columbia, Kentucky, an open textbook and a pencil, a desk lamp. His feet are propped up in his roommate's chair, while he reads a chapter on writing the five-paragraph essay. He's got an open can of RC cola at his side. And mindlessly, his right arm is holding his tool to his head, it buzzing away, his scalp shaking ever so slightly. A printed ad in a magazine reiterates in his subconscious: *Three simple steps: Just plug in for twenty minutes a day, rub the end of the Pulser on your head, and let the science of electronic pulse action do the work for you! The Electro-Pulse Hair Regenerator 2000, will rejuvenate the thickness of your hair in five weeks.*

It hadn't worked.

At Country Oven Bakery, the workers that called him Double D joked with him about the shininess of his head. High up above them in the factory rafters, half-dome lights hung down, my Dad's head without his hairnet reflecting halogen. They called the bright white bulb of his head a safety hazard, and they all laughed together when the linemen simultaneously put on sunglasses when my Dad walked into the room one day.

Country Oven Bakery Management Performance Appraisal, Date: *February 18, 1992*

Employee: *Darrell Strobe*, Position: *Area Supervisor*, Summary Evaluation: *Good*

Performance Commentary: *During 1991 the frozen bread lines' produced tonnage has increased by 4.2% over 1990. This increase in tonnage has brought the bread line to a point of exceeding its projected capacity. Darrell has insured this line maintains a flexible crew to meet the increased production demands. By reviewing the labor used on the bread and roll lines, Darrell has helped contribute \$65,463 savings to Country Oven.*

Dad was reducing, reusing, and recycling long before it was trendy. He was a spend-thrift. He shopped at Hyder's, the only store in town that specialized in the used shoe business. He would bring home his size 13s, extra-wide, polishing them up in the bathroom, and then emerging out like he held a pair of twin trophies. Debuting them to us, he beamed, "Good as new, huh? Why would anybody pay money for new ones?"

Presents from Dad came with a yellow SALE tag stuck to them. The only new things he ever bought were on clearance. One of the last gifts he ever gave me was Earl Woods' *Playing Through*, a biography about instilling a hard work ethic into his son Tiger from the earliest age. Daddy Woods, famous for putting Tiger on TV at two years old, was under serious public scrutiny when Dad found this book. People were asking if Tiger ever had a chance to choose his own path. Was he forced into a life that he didn't want? Even before Tiger wrecked the family car, people were asking if Tiger was going to crack under pressure from all the attention. Earl Woods was not a shining example of fatherhood. But the book was clearance-priced, after all, and Dad could not pass up a bargain. I still hold on to the book, not because of the fathers-and-sons message it's supposed to promote, but because to me it is a trophy of Dad's thrift.

When the assembly line at the plant had problems, I think Dad secretly cheered inside. These were the days that he brought home cookies and breads that would otherwise be thrown away. Imperfections at the factory meant free food for the family. The deep freezer was full of frozen dinner rolls, round carrot cakes, and long loaves of French bread. With our mass of frozen baked goods, we were ready for the apocalypse.

He would pull into the driveway those days with a little tap of the horn. Michelle and I would run outside to help him carry the bounty in. Reaching into the car, he pulled out a case of that day's mishap, handing it off with two hands, like a fragile present, while he got out his dirty Tupperware dishes from the lunch he had packed to work. My favorite was the double chocolate chip cookies. He handed these directly to me. The case was opened before they made it into the house.

Country Oven Bakery Management Performance Appraisal, Date: *February 25, 1993*

Employee: *Darrell Strobe*, Summary Evaluation: *Good*

Performance Commentary: *Darrell's efforts to meticulously answer all questions and assure maximum communication with the employees is demonstrated daily. His efforts to demonstrate fairness and maintain an equitable employee relationship at all times is one of Darrell's priorities. While this is an asset, Darrell sometimes spends too much time in the decision-making process and procrastinates decisions.*

When I was young, we would walk in a restaurant, and so often there would be someone to say, "Well, there's Double D!" Dad's smile would curve around his face, relaxing the taut skin around his forehead into a series of wrinkles that looked like stacked equal signs. He would walk to their table, meeting the worker's family, patting their kids on the back, saying, "I've heard a lot about you before," and launching into long conversations that weaved familial knowledge about his employees that surprised everyone. Mom would offer the worker and their family a sympathetic look and lean over his shoulder, saying, "We're going to go ahead and sit down." At the table, we would wait for him. Menus opened and then closed; we ordered for him. Mom embarrassed by his long-windedness. A slow wait which eventually always found its end

with Dad coming to sit down, smiling, so happy to have seen his colleague and met their family, oblivious that he had caused discomfort.

In school, teachers asked me if I was Darrell Strode's son on the first day of class as they called roll. He was the PTA president, and everyone liked him. When I got my driver's license, the clerk behind the counter asked me who my father was. I told her, and she smiled. "I used to work at Country Oven Bakery," she said, "Your daddy is such a sweet man!"

Lehman, Singer, and Rossman 30-day Review, Date: *October 2, 2003*

Employee: *Derick Strode* Position: *Billings Specialist*

Review: Derick has been a fast learner and has significantly contributed to the department in his first month. He has cleared out the backlog of simple invoices so that the department can focus on overcoming the current influx of new records. His production or learning is not a problem. Initially, he has been an excellent employee. However, he occasionally seems to drift off into thoughts and there is some concern about the amount of time he spends looking towards the window. One wonders if he is a team player or has the company's best interests in mind. His attendance has been perfect, but he often clocks in late and clocks out early. He says he rides the bus.

Adapting to life in Cincinnati was easy at first. I looked forward to getting home to the apartment after work. At first, Shannon and I shopped in the evenings. We took the few hundred dollars that I started with and bought the necessities to make my one bedroom apartment a livable home. We bought an iron and a mini-ironing board. It came with a blue, cloth sheath that had a duck stretched over the board. We bought a broom, a mop, and a laundry basket. For the first time in my life, I owned my own bath towels, toothbrush holder, and a matching soap dish. After my first check came from the law

firm, we went to a furniture liquidator and took away a particle board bedroom set for \$300. At Wal-Mart, we found a dinette set for a hundred. Shannon cut out black-and-white images from a 16-month calendar of London for wall art. The furnishings were cheap, but owning it all made it feel like home.

We explored Cincinnati, her showing off her hometown, teaching me its history, a hostess. She tried hard to convince me that I made the right choice to move to her. She met me downtown after work on Mondays and we walked to the Contemporary Arts Center for free-admission-days. She took me to the Playhouse in the Park, up on the hill in Eden Park, and we became regulars at seeing shows there. For my birthday, she bought me a city art pass so we could get discounted tickets.

On Sunday mornings, we went up to the hilltop Mt. Adams neighborhood and walked the streets, holding hands, dreaming of the day we could afford to rent a place up on its trendy streets. Maple leaves hung over the rolling sidewalks, their edges turning orange. We liked to stop in at a place called Café Mocha. They had a well-lit counter, fresh bagels in the window, and a corkboard full of concert posters and local events. While she read the Sunday edition of the *Enquirer*, I would open my journal and write a few pages.

My favorite part of the city is the river. Yesterday, we drove down River Road out to the west of town. The road twists with the bends in the river, cutting through neighborhoods that are in that narrow, flat section of bottom land between the river and the bluffs. A lot of the houses are 19th century, with frilly Victorian designs. Spires and towers from Catholic cathedrals rose up. Oily trains clanked

on the old riverside tracks, hauling open tubs of raw materials to factories and mills with smoking exhaust pipes. I thought of the Valley of Ashes and looked for the billboard. It wasn't there.

On the way back, we took the Anderson Ferry across the river. I cut the engine after we drove on, and we got out and stood with the other passengers on the deck while we crossed. A two-man crew ran the show. A little steel cabin for the captain with its metal bolts painted navy grey and lacquered over in a thick gloss. The deck full of people and there was this feel of excitement, like we were all suddenly going out to sea. Diesel fumes rose up from underneath the boat. The air smelled blue. The water frothing under the rotors. A shiny film of foaming effervescence left clinging to the Ohio bank as the captain pushed up the throttle. Our feet were vibrating.

Across the river on the other side, Kentucky rose up like a green canyon wall out of the river. There were washouts in the bluffs. The land looked creased, like the fold of a map fell just there. A little twisty road came out of the river where the ferry lands. It goes up and up the green bank.

A windy day. The ferry's bottom smacked the water coming off a wave. A cold spray of river water across our faces. A taste of rain, rotting leaves, and mud. Cloudy swirls of water churned up from the bottom through deep aqua black, the water full of motion, a looking glass into the unknown. A drowned state line below us.

A century and a half ago. The boundary of North and South. Now a simple boat ride. Seven bridges to choose between. The people that crossed this river then. Hunted. The run for freedom. This was the migration route. This was the moment of truth. These waters. Shallower then, no locks, no levees.

When we landed on the other side, the sound of the boat's metal grate scraped up against the concrete ramp. Car doors shut and passengers hopped back in. Car engines cranked. There was the steep, green wall of the south bank of the Ohio River. I could almost hear Baby Suggs singing in the trees. Kentucky. Sweet home.

Country Oven Bakery Management Performance Appraisal, Date: *January 30, 1995*

Employee: *Darrell Strobe*, Summary Evaluation: *Deferred for corrective training*

Performance Commentary: *Darrell's crew includes 2 clerks. Due to Darrell's ineffectiveness, the Clerks essentially accomplish what the crew does without much help from Darrell. They have made numerous comments that Darrell does not take a leadership role in directing the activities of the crew or position himself to make timely decisions during the shift. Several of the crew have indicated that Darrell is not knowledgeable of their performance and doubt his ability to assess their work or reviews. Darrell does not assert himself as the leader of the crew. He fails to give clear and firm directions to members of the crew. Additionally, his reports are usually late, feedback is slow, and planning and scheduling is not timely. He has problems maintaining schedules for team meetings, regulatory training, and employee reviews.*

A no-name consultant from North Carolina was brought in to interview him, making judgments on his worldview after an hour, on his ability to experience joyful spontaneity. Who was this person? Who were they to make psychometrical assessments? Writing in their horoscope-fashion, who were they at all?

Dad never let on that things were going bad at work. He hid it all so well until the end.

During the day, Dad lived in a world of corporate hogwash. He succumbed to a boss who asked leading questions with only one right answer. He worked in a world of admonishment and shame, where no one ever asked, *Why is this happening to Darrell? Is he OK? Shouldn't he see a doctor?*

But he came home in the evenings with cases of not-just-right rolls. He put on his comfortable blue polo. He worked in the yard. His head shining in the sun.

He knew.

Recently Mom went through the boxes that made it to the new house. She found newspaper clippings on the disease that he had cut out. His neatly jotted note in the margin: *Alzheimer's*.

Memo: Darrell Strobe Personnel File

From: Leon Carroll

Re: Performance Review Evaluation

Date: May 31, 1995

Darrell continues to be slow to recognize problems and react toward a quick and effective solution. He does not usually recognize situations which need work orders submitted and other areas where an initiative would be expected from a supervisor. Slow, or no response at all, to safety inspections is an example of such problems. On one occasion, Darrell called and reported that he had loaded a load of chocolate chip cookies on his shift for shipping to outside storage. It turned out that his crew did not load the product, but should have done so. This does not reflect favorably on Darrell's knowledge of his crew's activity only a few hours before.

Out in the backyard of the old house, Dad had hung clotheslines from the giant trees. Wearing blue jeans and a white tee, he strung the line from the Tulip Poplar to a big Maple, down to a Hickory that spat its woody nuts down in the fall. The autumn hickories rolled like marbles across the dry, packed clay of our backyard when they fell. Dad sung *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound* in his loudest baritone while he stretched the cord tight. The noise of the wind in the trees gave him confidence that no one could hear. But I could. His voice rose in high pitches for the chorus as the wind pattered leaf-against-leaf high above him. Dad always sang while out working in the yard. The vast yard of his dream home. The protecting woods. It felt safe. No one was there to judge.

Even quiet Mom sang *Paradise Tonight* by Mickey Gilley and Charli McClain in a voice I could hear from inside days later. She was hanging out her first load of whites.

They were so proud of the place. Together they had picked out the land, and envisioned the finished product. I was seven when construction started. I looked up at the big trees that were going to be our backyard. The field out front ran a tenth of a mile out to the highway. Alongside the field, a string of muddy tire tracks that would be graveled over into our driveway. A white, wood fence and three peach trees.

Dad put his hand on my shoulder and stretched out his arm in front of us, explaining, “This is all going to be the front yard. You’re going to have to help me mow it.” And, I would. Someday.

They picked out every material, every furnishing. Wood beams in the living room that they’d peg baskets on for country charm. The washer-and-dryer in a closet

even within the utility room so it could be hidden away. The Vermont marble on the two-and-a-half bath counters.

“I don’t know where Darrell got the idea,” Mom told me recently, “but he wanted the fireplace brick to be the same brick that’s on the Opryland Hotel. We made a special trip down to Nashville one day when started building and walked all around that big place. And, sure enough, we got it.”

For Mom and Dad, the dream was bigger than I could understand at the time. It was the culmination of everything they had worked for. They had talked about this house for a decade. They’d get Dad closer to work. Find a place with a big yard, maybe near a farm, but certainly a place with some privacy.

They planned, worked, and saved. They built their dream home. They sat on the big front porch, and took in the smell of new lumber. The hickories pattered down.

Five years later, Mom and Dad went to Lowe’s and bought the red and white For Sale by Owner sign and wrote our phone number on it with a big black marker. We walked out to the end of the driveway together as a family. The peach trees along the white fence were dropping their last fruit of the year onto the hot ground. The good peaches gone. These fruits red and black, with worm holes and flies digging their forelegs into the mushy rot.

It was a dry August. Dad knocked the corners of the sign into the ground with a rubber mallet. We watched Dad from the shade of a peach tree like three mourners

gathered at a funeral. Those strikes of rubber on metal frame sounding like the hammering shut of a coffin. Us feeling like the dream had died.

It had been over a decade since Mom had left her last job at the New Farmer's National Bank. In this time, she had mastered the art of being a stay-at-home mom. But she said we were going to need whatever money she could make now if the house didn't sell.

She started waiting tables at a buffet restaurant that had just opened in the mall. One \$3 tip at a time, she tried to save the house. When she came home, she had Dr. Pepper stains on her pant leg, the oily air of deep fried chicken soaked into the cloth of her shirt, and the smell of french fry grease in her hair. She would empty the pockets of her apron onto the kitchen table.

This became our time. Our ritual. She sorted out the dollar bills, straightening corners, unfolding wads of money and pressing them smooth. If there was a five dollar bill, it was a good day. I separated the coins out into tiny piles of whole dollars. Mom would count up the total. In a Mead spiral-bound notebook, she wrote the day of the week in neat cursive and then recorded the tips for the day in a right column. The old banker in her keeping records. As she wrote the day's earnings, we became conditioned to thinking how this \$67.74 could help us hold on for another day.

She put the bills into an old White Diamonds perfume box, the coins into a gallon-sized wine jug, making a heavy, metallic *clunk* as they landed in the little mint.

This is how Mom delayed the inevitable. The mortgage was with PNC Bank. Mom tried to rationalize with them on the phone. "The house is up for sale. We can't

help it if we can't sell it. He doesn't even have a job right now. Can we have one more month?"

Dad's behavior dog-legged. He started spending hours in the basement alone. In that unfinished concrete cavern, he re-arranged spare furniture pieces to make himself a reading room in a corner. He piled boxes into walls. He took an old, school-bus-yellow desk and cleaned it up. His loquaciousness evaporated.

As if he were trying to save artifacts that told the story of his time, he took to cutting out news stories from the paper. There were stories about O.J. and Hotlanta, Rwanda and Whitewater, Hale Bopp and Nancy Kerrigan's shin. Rectangular clippings of different dimensions, scissored out with neat, right angles. Thin, black and white pictures Scotch-taped to their corresponding story. Piled indiscriminately into a cardboard box in Dad's cordoned off, make-shift office. An old blue rocking chair, a floor lamp, and his yellow desk. His sanctuary. He was trying to remember what he had read. He was trying to keep place of himself in the world. He was leaving clues for his family of what he had known.

For months on end, the house payments didn't get made in full. Mom ran from table-to-table refilling drinks as fast as she could.

When I took the job at the firm, I was told that the entire finance department had to work a twelve hour shift on the last day of each month. One evening of overtime a month—no problem, I said. But the company was in a boom. All across Ohio and Kentucky, families were losing their homes to foreclosures. Sheriff's offices were knocking on

doors serving eviction notices. Courts were deciding fates without faces. Judgments were being made, public announcements were being posted, homes were being sold off, while children packed into their grandparent's houses like refugees. While people went broke and homeless, having pulled the lever of the American dream machine and losing, Lehman, Singer, and Rossman were rolling in legal paradise with the banks. Action. Collections. Earnings.

From: m.dogleman@lsrlegal.com
To: Billings@lsrlegal.com
Sent: Friday, October 3, 2003 4:58 PM EST
Subject: Mandatory Overtime to Combat Backlog

Hi all,

Great news! The past two quarters have seen a 52% increase in caseload for the firm. Good business for the firm means that we all have job security. It also means we have to work a little harder. As could be expected, the Billings department has felt this influx much later than some other departments, as the lag time between casework and invoicing is usually realized at least one month after-the-fact. To be short, invoice backlog is spiking. Our backlog has gone from a modest and healthy 259 records on June 30 to 1,311 on September 30.

To combat this, mandatory overtime hours will be required for all Billings Department employees starting on Monday, October 6 and lasting until further notice. Hours will be increased from the typical 8 AM – 5 PM to required hours of 8 AM – 8 PM daily, Monday - Friday. Lunches will be delayed to more evenly split your workday. Additionally, Saturday hours from 9 AM – 3 PM hours will be required next Saturday, October 11. Future Saturday work requirements are unlikely, but may be necessary. We will monitor this on a week-to-week basis and let you know as details become available. To meet Ohio Department of Labor laws, you will be compensated for 150% of your wage for all hours worked in excess of 40 hours per week.

Work intake from upstairs continues to show signs of increase, so the spike in volume may continue through the fall. I know this will come as good news for those of you who have been looking to increase your own earnings. Keep up the great work and enjoy the company's success!

Cordially,

May Dogleman, CFO

We didn't get through the backlog *in no time* as promised. In fact, from that point on, time drug by as slow as the barges struggling east against the river's current. The days blended together into 66 hour work weeks, and despite all the extra hours, the backlog grew. The unlikely Saturdays became regular working days. Shannon and I stopped going to Mt. Adams. My city art pass got lost in the sock drawer. I slept through the morning of my one-day-off-a-week instead. The weeks blurred into months. One day the leaves fell when I was at work and then Christmas came and went with a one-day break. Snows piled onto the frame of the Roebling Suspension Bridge and then melted off in icy glops, dropping into tiny splashes into the river below. But I never saw this. Every daylight hour was spent in the fluorescent sixth floor billings world.

One evening in January right before eight, Shannon called me and said not to take the bus, that she was downstairs parked on the street. It was a rough patch. This was sweet, her showing up to drive me home. I walked out of the building at eight o'clock. Downtown was nearly empty. The streets were wet with melted snow, puddles, and patches of ice. And there she sat in her sputtering old Toyota Corolla. My breath steamed out of me—exhaust from an invoice factory. I was so anxious to get home and eat a microwaved dinner, so anxious to get home with her and relax, so ready for bed. She wanted us to go out with a group of her friends, and that's why she had come to get me. She thought it was exactly what I needed—a night out, a strong drink, some society.

We fought. She told me I had stopped being fun. I told her she didn't understand how hard I was working, and I told her I was doing it for her. She accused me of resenting her because I had been the one to move and hated my job. I denied it, but it was true. We yelled our way across the bridge out of downtown that night. The Toyota

red with anger. She dropped me off at the apartment and drove off. And that night when I called her to say I was sorry, she didn't answer the phone.

I called home. Mom was working an evening shift then, trying to keep them afloat. Even the down-sized home hadn't fixed it all. Dad answered. His voice so confused, so far away. Had he hated the corporate world? Hated the factory? He had been measured by productivity numbers for 14 years at the plant. How did he stand it? I couldn't make it one year. We didn't talk about this. I asked him had he had dinner. Did he turn off the oven? Was he sure? Could he go check while we were on the phone? He put the phone down and forgot to come back.

Lehman, Singer, and Rossman 120-day Review, Date: January 16, 2004

Employee: *Derick Strobe* Position: *Billings Specialist*

Review: Derick is becoming a problem in the department. His numbers declined from an average of 84 invoices per day in November to 67 for December. His co-workers report that he is angry about the overtime hours and is not a team player. He has been caught writing in a journal on two occasions during working hours. Clearly he is not in tune with his job and his interests are not those that the company shares. During a one-on-one meeting on January 15, he seemed especially bitter that he had never met Lehman, Singer, and Rossman. A close eye needs to be kept on Derick, and referral to M. Dogleman may be necessary if matters don't turn around very soon.

I stopped trying with the job. I focused on myself, and explored the question that plagues so many recent college graduates: *what should I do now?* It was clear that the law firm was a temporary stopover. I devoted my lunch breaks to exploring job openings. At my desk, I half-heartedly chugged out more thousand-dollar invoices to BB&T and Fifth Third, while daydreaming about what was next in my life.

A girl named Katie moved into the cube next to mine and we became partners in fighting off work. She was my age and we were ten years junior the next youngest person in the Billings Department. We sent e-mails back and forth, getting to know each other in a digital world even though we were only a cloth wall apart. She was so close that I could hear her snort when she read something funny in my e-mails. Yet, we hardly ever spoke. I told her about Shannon and about the fights we were having more often. I blamed my job. She wrote back about her boyfriend and said that she thought he would propose soon.

The sixth floor was an environment of meticulously supervised production, and instead of conversation, there was the rap of fingers tapping numbers on a keyboard, the squeaky cry of printers whirring out invoices, and the crunchy fold of paper. Was this the sound of success?

Not mine.

May Dogleman walked to the edge of my cubicle one day. She was in a navy skirt suit and wore a menagerie of bronze bracelets on her left wrist. She asked if she could speak to me in her office. Katie shot me troubled wide eyes as I looked over my shoulder into her cube as I walked past. Rebecca Fritz was in May's office waiting. They had tracked my productivity and saw the decline. They had asked IT to look into my e-mail's Sent folder. May Dogleman told me I was poisoning the department. It's still the meanest thing anyone ever said to me. They wrote me up, a warning that was meant to say, *Shape up NOW, or we'll fire you*, but that I read as *It's time to collect what's yours and go*.

I scheduled a week of vacation time with the days I had saved up, and on the day I received my check with my vacation pay, I turned in my two-week notice. Since our e-mail world had been hacked, Katie and I took to passing notes back and forth like kids through the cloth folds in the cubicle walls. Right in the middle of my processing a Judgement Settlement Acquisition invoice, a little slip of paper would poke through my wall, Katie sliding it up and down playfully from the other side, wiggling it like a little paper belly dancer, and then she would give it a flick, so that it went flying through the air. We drew caricatures of May Dogleman. I drew a skull and crossbones around her head and Katie drew on devil's horns. We got smart and didn't get caught.

In my last days, I took home anything that was mine. But I left the tacked pictures of my father and my baby nephew until the end. I clocked out at eight o'clock on the last night. I walked out into the late winter air with Katie and hugged her goodbye on the cold sidewalk. She told me she was putting in her two week notice the next day too. We high-fived and we looked up at the sixth floor and cursed the company under our breaths. And then I said goodbye to her.

As the 17X rolled over the bridge to Kentucky that night, Cincinnati's lights dazzled on the river. I looked up at the skyline. The Carew Tower was lit up with spotlights, its yellow bricks dazzling, climbing up and up, the damp winter air turning into clouds around the 40th floor, the observation deck swallowed in fog. The city was beautiful.

When Dad was released from his job at the plant, the same people that called him Double D started telling my Mom in the following weeks how his behavior at work had

noticeably changed over his last two years there—how he had forgotten obvious parts of his day-to-day routine that should have been engrained in him with his fourteen years’ experience. When he started seeing doctors—general practitioners first, and then psychologists and neurologists, it was hard even for the professionals to accept that he possibly had Alzheimer’s disease so young. Even though that was their only suspicion—he was a perfect match for the profile of the disease—they still ordered myriad tests done because he was only turning 50 at the time.

There were blood tests and brain scans. Spinal fluid was extracted and lab analyses run. Could it be a vitamin B12 deficiency? No. Thyroid-caused? No. Well, then, let’s try an MRI. A CT-scan. Nothing. The tests turned up an otherwise healthy, middle-aged man.

After one of the doctor’s appointments, Mom called me into her bedroom whispering, “There’s something you have to see.”

She pulled out a manila folder from her underwear drawer. Inside it, only a few pages, stapled together. She had hidden it there, as if it were top-secret material—something Dad should never see again. It was the results of a mental examination that had been given to Dad that day.

I took the papers into my hands. My eyes perused the page. Dad had gotten almost everything wrong. He couldn’t spell the word “WORLD” backwards. He couldn’t repeat the phrase, “No if’s, and’s, or but’s.” He had successfully followed the command to fold a piece of paper and put it on the floor, but he couldn’t read a card that said “Close your eyes,” and follow its instruction.

When Dad was finally diagnosed, I was halfway through college. Michelle was moved out. It had been seven years of terrorizing finances for my family—creditors calling and stacks of notices arriving in the mail. A father who had grown ever-more forgetful, withdrawn, quieter, and stranger. It was finally a doctor at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center that said it with certainty. The diagnosis had the effect of the doctor finally throwing his hands up in the air, a way of saying, “This is it. Now you can just live with this.”

But of course Dad had already been living with it. There was no surprise factor. Even before he knew it, even before we knew it, the disease was changing Dad.

Seventeen years after the first signs of the disease--ten since the diagnosis. Dad's still fighting. That is, his body's still alive. To keep up with the history of his decline is difficult. So much in my own life—so much in anyone's life—changes so drastically in seventeen years. It is a large span of time to think about one disease. It's a long time to think about the eventual end. I was a kid in middle school when it all started. Michael Jordan was still playing for the Bulls. I was watching *Boy Meets World* and *Hanging with Mr. Cooper* on Friday nights. Lady Gaga was nine. That was 221 full moons ago.

Now I'm thirty. I'm married. I've gone to college, traveled on four continents, took jobs and left jobs, moved away and came back home. It's these life events of my own that I manage to keep up with it at all. Dad's slouch into the disease has been frustratingly slow. His healthy body has worked hard to stave off its deteriorating mind.

By using my own memories, these fixed points in the past, I can think of how Dad was then, and know how far he's come.

On a Saturday morning in 1999, I heard him crying in the basement of our old, country house. I was a senior in high school then. His depression was at its worst in those days. He had finally gotten to the point then that he was seeking medical help. Something was wrong with him, wrong with his memory, wrong with his ability to process thought, but what? At that time, he would still have been able and must have asked himself this question a hundred times a day.

What is wrong with me? What is wrong with me?

This was the worst time for him. He was so keenly aware that his mind was failing him. The questions, the worry, the betrayal of the brain that lived in his head was ever-present. His brain so obviously playing tricks, but why?

Seven years after Dad lost his job, the thrift that had led him to save money during his adult life couldn't withstand the mortgage of his and Mom's dream home in the country without steady income. They downsized to the little house with red geraniums on the front porch. As they moved out, Dad tried to save years of collections of glass bottles and family antiques from the hands of junk dealers and day-workers that Mom had hired to clean out Dad's basement. He couldn't remember the words to protest that day.

On that Labor Day, I remember driving my Dad to the hospital after Michelle went into labor. We drove down his street of Bradford Pears and as we swung about the little roundabout at the end of his cul-de-sac, he made the same, simple comment that day

that was routine when he rode in my car. His vocabulary was shrinking down. He kept quiet most of the time, as if there was nothing to say, a 180-turn from his old self. His slow voice that day: “Your car handles so smooth,” but otherwise silence on the way to the hospital.

Dad had already stopped driving at that point. A few months before, he told my Mom that he had forgotten his way home when he went out during the day. He had stopped the car in a gas station parking lot. He sat scared and waiting without getting out of the car. He waited for a spark, a memory, clarity. Over an hour passed until he remembered, like he had never forgotten, how to get home. That was the last time he drove. He gave up driving willingly.

I remember how solemn and quiet his face looked that day in the hospital waiting room while he rubbed his thumb across the cup, the pad of his finger rough, tearing flakes of white off on to his pant leg. I remember wondering if I was making the right decision to leave home, leaving Mom to bear the responsibility for him alone.

I listened over the phone from Cincinnati to his voice in the months following my move, him talking about his day and then going blank, the line falling silent in mid-sentence, while he struggled for memory. The speed of his words then had the quality of the batteries going dead—a slow, painstaking search of syntax, his sentences dragging through his lips with an unnatural twist of syllables, a slur creeping into his voice.

When I moved back home from Cincinnati after two years, I remember feeling how far he had slid into the disease. I introduced him to a young woman who later became my wife. She realized quickly that she only could engage him in conversation

through a narrow menu of topics, all concerning his distant past rather than the immediate day. She got to know him through repeated conversations about working in tobacco fields as a boy, about life on the farm, conversations that acted like therapy for him remembering a bygone time.

Mom stopped taking Dad out in public in 2009. He forgot how to feed himself that year. Feeding him in restaurants became too embarrassing, too difficult. She had to escort him as they walked, holding his arm so he wouldn't wander off. His body was forgetting the motions of how to sit down into a vehicle's passenger seat. She would spend fifteen minutes with him in a store parking lot, trying to help him remember how to bend his body, but him unable to piece the motions together. She would walk him around the parking lot for a few minutes, hoping to clear his mind, like hitting the reset button, returning to their car to try again until finally there would be a locomotive connection between his mind and body. He would sit down into the car as smoothly as if he had never forgotten how. Eventually, it was just easier to stay at home with him. Mom quit her job to take care of him around the clock, and she found a doctor who made house calls.

Over the years, he forgot how to brush his teeth. He forgot to put on a coat at first, and then he forgot that the seasons changed. He forgot to shut the door, and then he forgot how to come back home. He forgot how to tie shoes, how to make a phone call, and to turn off the stove. He forgot his wallet, and then later he forgot how to pay at a cashier. He forgot to go to the bathroom. He peed his pants in the mall, my Mom trying to hide him and his embarrassment as they went to the car. He forgot how to shine shoes, to save glass bottles, and he eventually forgot the tobacco fields that he worked in as a

boy. He forgot how to use the remote control to the television, he forgot how to wisp eggs, and he forgot how to fold clothes. He forgot how to walk down steps; the amazing, fluid motion of the human body that no one ever thinks about, forgot how to move him. He lost the ability to balance a glass without spilling iced tea down his shirt, and then he forgot how to use a fork. He forgot how to talk. So gradual, a losing of vocabulary as slow as a child's acquisition of words. At first losing track of a sentence—going blank for a moment—but later the loss of proper nouns: the months of the year, the town he lived in, the name of his grandchild. He was down to two and three word phrases, and then to one word replies. And then the jibberish started. The voice of a tortured brain sending out errant signals, wild sounds like the scrape of a metal grate on concrete, the whining hum that sounds like a demon's song, the call of an animal. Last year, he forgot to say "Yes." It was the final word to go.

Memo: Management Appraisal for Darrell Strobe

From: Leon Carroll

Date: June 6, 1994

Darrell is making serious efforts to meet our expectations. However, his weak areas will require significant changes in his personality and personal habits in order to become more effective as a supervisor.

Now Dad has forgotten almost everything. In the mornings, Mom bathes him with rinse-free soap while he lies in the bed. He has forgotten how to raise his body up in the mornings. She puts a diaper on him and hoists him up with a hooyer lift, the home health tool that makes his existence at home even possible. The robotic arm system arches over

his body, a net underneath him, a hydraulic pump, and Mom, her arms so used to the work, lifting his body into a sitting position with the machine. In the final days he could get on his feet, she walked with him, her arms around his body like a baby's walker, keeping his balance for him as he tipped forward and back.

His body is starting to defy sitting in a chair, like a spoonful of jelly might. Occasionally, he still remembers how to smile, and in those moments, appears very young. He just turned 65, and I felt a sense of community for him now that he is finally old enough to join the majority group of Alzheimer's sufferers who are senior citizens.

Mom bought a hospital bed and it's set up in the living room. On his worst days, she uses it. It has a remote control lift which pushes his body up into sitting positions and reclines him back when he sleeps. We have a wheelchair, plastic-lined bed pads which repels his urine from the mattress, and straps and harnesses that help us lift his body.

Mom has become highly inventive, creating ways that she can continue to care for him. She puts his medicine in a ziplock bag and beats it to a dust with a hammer twice a day. She mixes the dust of these pills in pudding and orange sorbet and feeds it to Dad like baby-food. She's learned how to roll him, changing the diaper of a still-two-hundred-pound man.

I don't think he can process what is said to him these days, but we still talk to him. My wife still mentions his days on the farm, hoping that for a moment he might think of the happiest days of his life. My mother will recall old memories with him, teasing him about not throwing anything away, a blue polo shirt that he wore too long. I call him Double D sometimes and rub his bald head, thinking maybe it will ignite a spark

of the day his workers put on sunglasses when he walked in to the room. The spark doesn't seem to catch.

If the conversation ever turns to Country Oven Bakery, Mom insists that we leave the room. Just in case he does understand. The closing memories of losing his job haunted Dad as he fell into depression in the early days of his disease. It's a form of respect, Mom's insistence.

Mom avoids the risk. She avoids the risk because the pain is our's too. We leave the room, leave Dad for a minute in his existence, and we talk about these memories, trying to make sense of the past, which is never fully possible. We can't forget the shame Dad went through in falling from corporate grace in his world of heightening confusion. But he can. He has.

And Mom knows that some things are just better left forgotten.

Barbarahood

I live on a street of Barbaras. Halfway down a standard city block, where house sits against driveway and driveway against the next house, my home is positioned in a scalene triangle of three widowed elders, all sharing the same first name. Within days of moving in, one Barbara told me, “My name is going to be easy for you to remember.” Because of their particular density and for lack of never having learned any of their last names, I’ve created a nickname for each Barbara that I keep to myself.

Next door is Old Barbara. She earned her nickname by being the most senior of the citizens. Old Barbara, with her messy tuft of white hairs, paints wooden Santa cutouts. The Santas accumulate slowly throughout the year into a neat pile on her front porch until November when they are ready to sell. Every Saturday evening her brother takes her out for quesadillas. She told me once that Saturdays are her favorite day of the week. Otherwise, her driveway is never bothered with cars. The leaves from last fall still on her sidewalk are only crunched by the mailman’s foot. At eight-thirty each evening, her house goes dark for the passing of another night. It has been twenty years since her husband died.

Goose Barbara has pets that add ambiance to the neighborhood. Two doors down, she keeps four white geese in her backyard. With their wings clipped, the geese lead a domesticated life. Fed seed and cornmeal out of a bucket, waddling around the chain-link fenced backyard, diving into their choice of three blue, plastic, kiddie pools on warm days, these birds honk with delight at all hours. On the sunniest days, Goose Barbara, who has been a widow since anyone on the block can remember, comes out onto

her front porch. She wears sunglasses and yellow, homemade dresses. Every three weeks, her son comes to town, parking his big rig at the curb. He steps out with his long, grey beard to spend a weekend with his mother. As he departs on a Sunday evening, it is unlikely that Goose Barbara will talk to anyone but her birds before he returns three weeks and four thousand miles later. I wonder how she gets groceries.

Catholic Barbara, who lives in a tidy home across the street, is my favorite Barbara. Every Saturday evening, she's off to mass in one of her ivory pant suits. When she gets home, she leashes up her white, miniature terrier, Buster, after the sun is down, and stands on the front sidewalk while Buster poops by the neighbor's sign.

Attention Pet Owners

City Ordinance

Section 6-12

Requires You to

Clean-Up After Your Pets

I walk over often to say hello. We both hate the ugly sign. She explains to me for the fifteenth time that her back prevents her from cleaning up the mess. Together we devise a plan to steal the sign in the middle of the night and toss it in a dumpster. We laugh together about the plan that will never materialize as our conversation breaks up. I look back at Barbara and Buster, stepping inside that house, and the porch light goes out.

Catholic Barbara is the most recent Barbara to join widowhood. Just last year, her husband died sitting at their computer. He was booking tickets to Phoenix when a heart

attack sent him to the floor. He never made it up. Ever since, Catholic Barbara's light-hearted conversations have turned heavier.

This menagerie of Barbaras keeps me in touch with the realities of widowhood. I think about my own mother, across town, a full-time caretaker for my father now. I wonder what her neighbors think about her. Her hobby is plane-spotting. With a primal sense of hearing, she identifies airplane engine noise from within the house, races to the yard, and scours the sky to find the source. She has behaved this way my entire life. When I was nine, a man knocked on our door and tried to sell us an aerial photo he took of our house. Looking closely at the image, taken from five-thousand feet, you could pick out mom's face in the yard squinting up at the plane. Now living in a subdivision of tightly packed homes, her neighbors must look at her, peering up into the sky, and wonder if she is crazy. But, for that moment, my mother is traveling somewhere where Barbarahood can't catch her.

Back to the Farm

If you've ever, on a Sunday noon, put your body back into bed, pulled up the covers tight around your neck, the white sheet, maybe the mauve blanket too, perhaps you've heard it. The quiet house, summer is outside, the shades are drawn tight in every window to reflect the sunlight back to the sky. The air conditioned cool rattles up out of the metal grate in the floor. The house bottled up tight, like a canister of coffee, keeping the heat sealed out, almost extinguishing, but not entirely, the washboard-scraping cicada calls in the tree outside your bedroom. The sheets cold, at first, to the touch of your skin, but then, you seal out the air and warmth swaddles you.

If you've ever put your head under the pillow in this moment, leaving just a little opening for your breath to enter and exit, your whole thinking sphere sandwiched between the cushion of the mattress and the pillow, while air flow rises up to the room.

Then you know it is like a cave here.

If you've ever felt that protection from the rest of the day, that moment when you delay the coming of going back to work tomorrow, that moment when you extend the carefree Sunday morning in total solitude, like burial. If you've ever silenced those thoughts and waited and listened in that make-shift world of hiding, then maybe you've heard the wild sounds of the body.

With an ear pressed to the mattress, you hear the crunching of the bed under your breathing. The press and release of fibers bending like elbows. They sound like warped guitar strings. You control it. You breathe faster and listen, the rhythm speeds up the percussion of the friction of soft cloth. You hold your breath. The air flow to the outside

world stops. A dead-end cavern. You strain to listen. A soft drum, your heart, unstoppable, and you think, *what if I could hold my heartbeats like my breath*, a grotesque thought that has never occurred to you on the surface. You hear your heart even in your head. The push of blood to your brain.

With an ear pressed to the pillow, you hear the scratch of the thread. You feel the sporadic, myoclonic twitch of your body—something you can't control—and it shakes you in a way that now feels violent. The fibrous pillow makes a thick-sounding rub against your ear with the slightest motion. The unnatural sound. You think of the Earth's crust, the slow movement and sudden snap of a plate, the tremor on the surface. The jungle noise of this dark world. The opaque insulation of bedding forces you to hear what's inside.

You hear the body in a way you never have before. The history of your heartbeat, clear now, a compounding power across time. 70 beats a minute. 4200 beats an hour. 100,800 beats a day. 36 million beats a year. 1.1 billion beats so far in your lifetime. The magnitude scares you. Blood being fed by the heart to the brain. The unthinkable number of bloody hearts across the world, the organ feeding thoughts, all of the beats, all of the life that is here and all of the life that has been here, but is now gone. Your heart beats faster, the release and intake of gas pours in and out of the cave opening. You listen to the concert of life in the otherwise silent bedroom. You imagine the chaos of death.

It all sounds like the wind.

It is hard to remember those days precisely. How Dad was then. The memories get jumbled up in the passing of time.

But I took along a digital camera that day and what is more accurate than a photo? I took three pictures that day, so I know that some memories about that day are exact. For example, I know Dad was wearing a wrist watch on his left arm. It had a metal band with a clasp closure. It was silver with gold lacing around the clock's face, and the hands of the watch are gold too. I can just make out that the watch has Roman numerals instead of Arabic. While the grains of pixels become too fuzzy as I zoom in closer to see what time it was, I know that it was exactly 2:55:39 PM on August 15, 2007. I right-click on this photo now, slide my cursor to the Properties function, and discover these details spelled out for me with certitude in my computer's brain. How is that for accuracy? Is it too exact for a memory? Do I not let imagination and ambiguity wander in enough?

Then, bear with me. Remember, there are only three photos. What I do not know is if Dad could still tell time then or not. These are the sorts of details that have strayed from *exact* placement to *probable* placement to *I'm just not sure* placement on the timeline of his disease.

I remember days when I helped Dad get dressed in the morning, and I clasped that watch on his left wrist because he couldn't do it himself. I did it even while knowing he couldn't tell time anymore. I helped him put on khaki pants, buttoned his short-sleeved oxford shirts all the way up except for the top one, and I laced his black belt through the loops on his pants, fastening it into the third hole, the one that had exposed threads worn away around it. I put the watch on him after getting up out of the floor where I had

kneeled in front of him while he sat on the edge of the bed. I had stretched his socks over his broad ankles. I remember seeing and feeling the scars on his feet as I did so, pink faults, with their basements in his fascia, where surgeons had reconstructed his bones. I remember pushing his shoes onto his feet and tying his laces.

The watch was the last step of helping him get ready in those days. The watch a gesture of normality. A simple action that took place every day either by Mom, Michelle, or me. The seconds it took to loop the watch over his hand and draw the clasp in to a little snap was a grand displacement of our acceptance of the current situation. Putting the watch on him in those days was like us saying, “Not yet.”

He’s not ready to forget how to tell time, not yet.

He is not ready to forget how to talk, not yet.

I am not ready to lose my father, not yet.

But were those days before or after this first photo?

In it, we are in Cave City standing in front of the Wigwam Village on the 31-W highway. Fourteen tipis, all painted white, with a red, circle zig-zag stenciled halfway up. They arc around a shared lawn of well-mown grass—individually air-conditioned, each with a double bed, HBO, and an en-suite bathroom. A sexy alternative to the Hampton. I am standing shoulder-to-shoulder to Dad. We pose. Here’s a clue: I smile and he smiles. He still knew how to take the cheese cue.

Cave City is the town that Dad was raised and where I was born. The photographer behind photo number one is the girl that I married. I know this because I

remember her being there, and we talk about this day often now that I have decided to write about it. I say to her, “What do you remember about that day that we took Dad to Cave City? The day when we went back to his old farm?”

Memory is collective and communal in this way. I don’t trust my own memories, not completely, to know exactly how the day played out. I can tell you that the day did not involve any disasters, heroics, dramatic epiphanies or breakthroughs. This is precisely why I cannot figure out why this day still plays so prominently in my memory of my father. I listen to her recollections, trying to match her memories on top of mine for confirmation that this day mattered for a reason.

There are problems with my story.

I remember things about that day that she doesn’t. For example, I remember not knowing exactly where we were out on the Old Lexington Road that day when we were looking for the Barton Farm. I remember thinking, we’ve come and we’re not going to find it. I was driving slow out there on that chip-seal country road. There wasn’t any traffic, just a few scattered houses here and there and a bunch of wire fence rows separating overgrown hay fields from the easement that the county mowed.

It was dry. I remember this because that was the first summer I was the advisor for international students at a university then. I remember the new students arriving from India and China and all over the world, and me asking them, “What do you think of it here?” I remember when an Indian student said he thought it would be greener in Kentucky and me promising him that it usually was. There’s a memory you can trust.

I remember Dad suddenly getting excited in the passenger seat. His vocabulary already disappearing and complete sentences hard for him to form. He might have said, “This it. Somewhere close.” Or, maybe it was nothing like that. But I remember him guiding me the last mile to the farm.

“Tobacco work is the hardest work there is.” This was my Dad speaking to me as a child. There was reminiscence in his voice of bygone days when he was young and had limitless energy to devote to the work. There was also gratitude in these words. Gratitude that he wasn’t in the hot fields anymore. Gratitude that he had made it into a steady job with a 401k. Gratitude that life promoted him on to easier work in a climate-controlled factory.

I learned about the toils of the Barren County burley tobacco industry through the countless stories that Dad told me as a child. It was 1960 when he started. He was fourteen years old. During the months of tobacco season, he moved out of his parent’s house and in at the Barton farm, where he was employed June to September.

Those summer sunrises, so early on the eastern cliff of the Central Time Zone, dew misted on the broad, papery leaves wetting his t-shirt as he walked down the rows, found him already hard at work topping the plants, his eyes scanning the leaves for diseases like frog-eye and ragged leaf. The sky cracking orange behind a layer of cirrus that would burn off by breakfast.

“It was the hottest I’ve ever been.” Remembering, he repeated this single phrase to me countless times while I was growing up. The mere act of Dad sweating triggered

tobacco days for him. It happened while tilling the early May garden, during the chain-sawing summer after the '94 ice storm when we cut up broken trees and ricked up their fragmented bodies. It happened after I held back the blackberry vines with the rake while Dad weed-eated beneath them.

He'd cut the engine and launch in about the heat. "It's not as hot as tobacco," he'd say. The spinning twine of the weed-eater chocked to a stop in fescue. "I got soaked all the way through my jeans with sweat." He lifted his Howard Baer trucking hat and pulled a white handkerchief out of his right pant pocket. He wiped his face dry, but new beads of sweat appeared in an instant. A handkerchief was always there, folded into a three-inch square napkin. "I'd drink a gallon of ice water in a single sitting when I could take a break."

Burley tobacco stories unveiled themselves in the car too. We rolled past the plots on the way to church, on the way to Edmonson County to visit my grandparents, but nowhere more than when we drove through northern Barren County.

There, the fields rolled out into a patchwork of tobacco plots. Always rectangular, the tight rows of tobacco in these plots flashed past the car like stills from a motion picture fanned into moving images of waving plants.

Barren County was still the center of the burley tobacco market in Kentucky even when I was a kid in the 1980s. The karst understory kept the fields from flooding here. When it rained, the ground soaked up exactly what it could. And when it rained any more than that, the ground emptied right into the cave-feeding sinkholes like tap water

into a drain. The water rushed off to the Green River in a network of caves, unseen. It was ideal farming land.

The opening days of market in November each year brought reporters into town from Bowling Green and Louisville. They parked their news vans outside the tobacco warehouses that were lined up along the Dixie Highway between Horse Cave and Cave City.

The motels in town filled up. Dad would drive us around their parking lots to count out-of-state license plates. North Carolinas were the most popular. These cars belonged to the buyers. On those November days, the evening news would lead off with interviews from a tobacco warehouse and the prices for this year's crop would show up on the screen like stock figures. Dad would shush us quiet when the WHAS reporter interviewed a farmer.

Even though Dad had left tobacco work when he went to college, he never disassociated from the community. He was proud of the work he had done.

His arms had a year-round perma-tan of the darkest brown. When I got old enough to realize that my sunburns and summer tans grew pale in the winter months, I noticed that Dad's didn't, and I asked him why. Even though it had been decades since he worked in tobacco he would say, "It's baked in me from the fields."

So many blistering days. The Earth tilting its northern hemisphere to the sun, the Barren County tobacco stretching itself up to the sunlight, reaching skyward. Planting in June, topping and pulling off suckers in August, and then spiking and hanging the tobacco from the barn rafters at the season's end for curing in September.

It wasn't anything like I remembered from childhood. I only remembered the Barton house from Halloween nights up until I was seven. That was the year we moved out of Cave City. But those first Halloweens of my life, Mom and Dad took Michelle and I to the Barton's after trick-or-treating. Dad had fallen in love with farming on their land. He had been the hardest worker they had, and in the Bartons, he found two employers who adopted him like a second set of parents. Up until they died, Dad remained close to them.

In the frame of those Halloween memories of my earliest years, the Barton house seems so much bigger and set higher off of the ground. In my memory, it's a Victorian, with lacy decorations around a heavily-spindled wrap-around porch. The windows are as grand and tall as doorways. The corner of the house, rising up into a little turret. I remember riding up to the Barton's and looking out of the backseat of the red Ford Thunderbird that Mom drove. I remember the spooky yellow light of the house pouring out of the windows into the late Halloween evening, and I remember the crunchy leaves from big trees that were clumped around the yard.

But as it turns out, some memories lie.

The second photo from that day is of the Barton house. Dad guided me up the driveway, almost cheering me on, "This is it," he encouraged. On an Ash tree in the front yard, the new owner had driven a single nail into the trunk, hanging a large NO TRESSPASSING sign. I watched for the imminent reality of someone stepping onto the porch with a shotgun, about how disappointed Dad would be if he didn't get to step out of the car and take a look.

I gave the horn a single, friendly tap. We waited. In the yard, there were two trees—fully grown, casting down circles of shade on drought-dormant Bermuda vines. There was a knee-high pile of limbs thrown together, ready for a fire. Inside the tangle of branches there is trash. I zoom in to this precise memory. 3:48:26 PM. Canon PowerShot A540. The pixels distort the refuse of the people who lived in the house, but one is a gallon milk jug with a red cap.

No one was home.

We stepped out of the car and looked at the house. Not the beacon in the autumn night that I remembered, this was a simple, almost shotgun-like construction. It couldn't have been over a thousand square feet. Raised off of the ground on a cinder block foundation by just a foot. There were two concrete-poured steps to mount the front porch, a porch that stretched across the slight entirety of the home's facade. Two single windows modestly framing a blue door. No turrets. Out of one window, an AC unit hummed away, an umbilical cord stretching out of it, feeding a lone, happy, green patch of weeds off the porch's side a meal of condensation.

The house's wood siding needed painting. Flakes of the last grey coat had chipped off and exposed the old wood slats beneath. Up on the roof, a row of shingles missing. A visible puncture above the porch swing, where a branch had blown down in some otherwise-forgotten storm.

The driveway was not graveled or paved. It was kept only loosely defined by the daily wear of tires. It ended in the front yard with an undulating and messy edge of the most resistant weeds. This is where we left the car.

Dad is not in the shot.

Now I rely on that faulty memory of mine again.

He stepped out of the car and looked at the home for only a minute. It wasn't disinterest in the house. Rather, it was the attraction of what he had wanted to come for in the first place. Out to the side of the house, the fields of the farm stretched out. He walked that way.

That day we had driven to Cave City avoiding the interstate. We had come up 31W from Bowling Green, following the highway past the wide-open fields of waving soybeans, and drying corn stalks. Out in the fields, clusters of wild growth crowded around the mouths of sink holes. Off to the left a couple of miles, the Chester Escarpment bounding up Mammoth Cave National Park. The green edge that perimetered in eighty-two square miles of wild-once-again forest. These were the trees that no one could cut. The forest here had been recuperating for 66 years. In forty-one, the federal government came in and drove out the families who had settled farms around the cave, they evicted the entrepreneurs who had set up day-tripping runs for early tourists.

Mom and Dad grew up with the park between them. In this forest is where the early 19th-century settlers mined saltpeter and calcium nitrate from the depths of the cave. In its caves, are the voices of slaves who guided the first underground tours in 1838. In the tangle of tree roots, the fecund remnants of the Mammoth Cave Railroad are still decomposing. Churches and cemeteries were maintained at Joppa and Good Spring, everything else let go to the woods. In the park, the Green River meanders like a great

snake, looking for the steamboats that once plowed its waters. And in Sand Cave, on the edge of the forest, the last whispers of cave explorer Floyd Collins still rise up out of the ground, nearly one-hundred years after the world threw a carnival on the surface, waiting for a rescue that wouldn't come in time.

In between my Mom and Dad's childhoods, these forests recuperated, the land's history still echoing in Fat Man's Misery and Bottomless Pit beneath the surface. On each side of Mammoth Cave National Park, a parent grew up, a few years, a river, and a great cave between them.

Mom had grown up on the park's hilly west side. Just up the street, Midway Missionary Baptist Church, sitting on a knob, a church bell mounted on a fifteen-foot stand in the cemetery among the tombstones, so many of them new in her childhood--the Great War's claim on Lindseyville. Up on the hill, the white structure, simple with its front doors centered on the building, a row of five windows down each side of its little sanctuary, a climbing white steeple on top. From the churchyard, green pasture land stretches off downhill to the park. It's only a mile-and-a-half away where the land goes untamed. This is where the Green River curls around and meets up with the tailwater of the Nolin Lake.

Her daddy was a fisherman. He had a metal tacklebox full of lures and hooks that I opened up in his garage on Sundays when I was little. My fingers rolled across the smooth edges of carefully painted fish, a plastic-tab, an exaggerated tongue hanging out, three piercing, gill-ensnaring, W-hooks hanging from each fish's body. I fingered the rubber worms and red and white bobbers that Pappaw cast onto the river. Dried brown

crumbs of packed sandwich-lunches, fish guts, and dirt in the corners of the tackle box. A minnow bucket nearby and the wood shelf where he chopped the heads off his catch, skinning catfish, silver stains worked into the wood from the scales. It all smelled like the mud of the river.

The dam at Nolin was first shut in 1963. Behind it, the river puddled up over the rich bottomlands of sad farmers. I imagine them standing ankle deep in mud as the water took hold of their fields, their arms crossed, saying goodbye to their land in exchange for a paycheck from the Army Corp. I imagine Pappaw standing on top of the new road that ran over the dam, looking down at the drowning fields, a toothpick hanging from his lips, a loose smile. He's ready to fish. That year the first silt of the Nolin Lake settled, and a muddy green lake filled up slower than a swimming pool. Mom was 12.

On the west side of the park, Mom grew up learning about the weather. As a small boy, my mother recounted to me memory after memory of my grandfather's interest and fear of the atmosphere. My mother explained my grandfather's meteorological interests with a degree of folklore present in her voice—"Your Pappaw used to say that a halo like that around the moon means that it will rain within 24 hours," she would tell me. Like oral stories passed down through past generations, I learned about the weather like a child listening to the traveling raconteur. What was science and what was fiction in my grandfather's stories was up for me to decide.

This fascination was a thread in our family tartan. I learned about sun doggies in winter skies that appear in the cirrus clouds. My mother pointed at a pink horizon once

during a summer thunderstorm and told me that it was going to hail. I was awestruck when she was right.

My grandfather was a hunter, a fisherman, a carpenter, and a salesman. He kept a wooden sign in the garage that had a painted stoplight on it. The words STOP, LOOK, BUY, were stenciled beside the stoplight's colors. He propped this sign up against the mailbox post for all occasions when he had something to deal. As a child, my mother helped him raise the family vegetable garden each year. Near the sewer line, they grew the biggest strawberries in Edmonson County and sold them by the roadside in early June. Later in the month, they would drive across the Tennessee border, buy up every firework they could afford that was illegal in Kentucky, and then take them back north across the state line for resale. Out by the storm pipe that ran under the road, they lit packs of Black Cats, flinging them with a quick wrist into the tunnel, and holding their ears while the fire destroyed its way through the firecrackers, blackbirds pouring out of the trees in panicked clusters.

He had been a soldier in the U.S. Army during World War II, a guard at Fort Knox during one part of his life, and had worked on a bowling alley construction crew. Nearly everything he did depended on the weather. Though he undertook a lot of endeavors, my grandfather never formally studied meteorology.

His fascination with the sky was derived out of his own curiosity, as well as out of the proximity to nature that was necessary with his rural lifestyle. The story that I loved to hear my mother tell the most was about thunderstorms when she was a child. Her house, like so many others in a post-World War II era, had been equipped with a

backyard cellar. I had played baseball, kickball, and dirtball on the mound hundreds of times as a child not realizing that the shelter beneath my feet was built out of fear of a Soviet nuclear attack. Despite having a cellar, which would have been adequate protection in even the most violent thunderstorms, my grandfather had regarded lightning as the most dangerous of threats. As such, the only way he felt safe during a thunderstorm was to ground himself to a highway in his car, rubber tires between his family and the road. Even in the middle of the night, he would jostle Mom and her siblings awake as soon as he heard thunder just to drag them all into the car and drive around the county until the storm had passed.

How could my mother have escaped her fascination with the weather? I imagine her eight-year old eyes peering out of the backseat window of a 1956 Ford Fairlane Crown Victoria, gazing awestruck up at cumulonimbus clouds illuminated by lightning at 3:30 in the morning. She recalls their thunderstorm car rides as her biggest adventures of childhood. The entire family a team of storm chasers trying to outrun the lightning. As a child, she would not have recognized that her father was a bit crazy, his fear of lightning irrational. As a child, she would not have cared. She was driving up and down Poplar Springs Road at 55 miles per hour, developing her own fascination with the weather. She was developing a tradition that she would pass down to me 25 years later.

Nineteen miles away, on the park's flatter east-side, Dad was in the tobacco fields of northeast Barren County.

Cave City was the undeniable gateway to the park. It had the highway and it had the hokey stopovers and take-your-money-fast stores. Full of day-tripper tourists, this side of Mammoth Cave is where the 31W highway was dotted with one-story, u-shaped roadstop motels of the 1950s.

Stop on in for a comfortable night only ten minutes away from the entrance of Mammoth Cave. Spend your days dazzled by the Frozen Niagra, the Snowball Room, and the River Styx. When you're back from the park, leave the car at your door, and walk on in to your queen-sized bed. An inviting swimming pool is located in the courtyard for your convenience with depths up to six feet.

Then I-65 was laid down the east side of park, just outside of downtown Cave City, and the whole town followed the traffic. The tourism market shifted west, just a couple of miles, to greet folks getting off at the new exit 53. This is where the Watermill Restaurant was built and the crystal rock shop stands popped up—*take home your own piece of the beautiful Kentucky caves*. Kitsch thrived. Big Mike's Rock Shop was built, and Guntown Mountain Amusement Park, with its Haunted House and hilltop Old West Town Showdown acted out daily for tourists April thru October. The wax museum, with its Abraham Lincoln and Mark Twain look-alikes, came to town. The Jellystone Campground, the Jesse James Riding Stable, and the Alpine Slide. *Sled down a hillside even in the summer! Hang on to your cap, you're gonna fly!*

But despite Cave City's tourists, all of the jobs that he could have taken selling tickets for cave walks or serving hamburgers in a roadside restaurant to families from Indiana and Tennessee, Dad didn't.

Just a mile outside of town, on the wide open fields of Barren County, the wind blew through the rows of coarse burley tobacco leaves. The tourists didn't drive Old Lexington Road. These were the lands left empty by nature, the lands that gave the county its name: Barren. Treeless grounds that American Indians loved to hunt. Beneath these fields, the ground was mole-holed out by water. With its undulations and divots, the fields of the Barton farm looked like a long row of sink-basins dotting the surface. From an airplane, these tracts would appear to fit in like puzzle pieces in a large, cadastral sweep of croplands that roll across Barren County.

I imagine Dad at fifteen, at work in this network of farms and tobacco plots. His shoulders already broader than mine will ever be. His light red hair is pushed down against his forehead by a baseball cap he wears. Sweating. The seat of his blue jeans wet, a clearly visible wet oval down his back. I see him, even though this cannot be true. He is holding a sickle and he's grabbing the flower-heads of five-foot tobacco plants and chopping them off. He throws the suckers down on the ground in piles of ten. He is not asked to do this, but this is a way of time-keeping for him. It is a metric rhythm to pass the time until breakfast.

In the field, Japanese beetles are flying around in the early morning sunlight, their hard, clumsy bodies beating their wings. They land on the flowering shoots and are tossed into the piles without regard. He doesn't watch the ground, though he is aware of the possibility of snakes. He listens to the weeds that have grown up since the field was tilled. He listens for a rustle.

I hear him, even though I cannot. He sings loud from time-to-time, in unpredictable outbursts of song, the way he would his whole life, when he worked outside. *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me,* and then a quick, mindless improvisation over to *Please help me, I'm falling...* that he had heard on the radio that morning as he drove the truck out to the field. Sometimes he talks to himself. Maybe he is talking about Sally Jo Benton, about the short red dress she wore on Saturday when he went downtown and walked down Main Street with Harold. About how after, the three of them went to the Dairy Queen and ate ice cream. His voice is deeper and older than fifteen.

When he takes a break, he lies down in the weeds where the shadow of the truck falls. The grass is barely wet—not dewing much since the last rain was 15 days ago. He takes off his shirt and uses it as a soggy pillow. He thinks about his sister up in Louisville, how at the start of summer he rode the L&N into Union Station with Mr. Barton. He thinks about how she looked across the platform, dressed in heels and waving hysterically at him. Those three days in Louisville he had felt dizzy. They had gone over to the Falls of the Ohio, changing buses in Jeffersonville and then walking the last six blocks down to the water. He had picked up flat stones and skipped them into the river with five, six, and even an eight bounce. He had found the two-inch wide fossil of a swirly snail. Now it was on the dashboard of the truck, and it slid across in the wedge of the windshield when he made too-fast turns.

He thought about getting out of Barren County. Cousin Kay was out in San Angelo, and she was always inviting him to come visit. Others had left. Teachers at school talked about a guy named Joe Downing that had grown up in Horse Cave who was

living in France now as a professional painter. Everybody was saying that Denny Doyle might go pro someday—that there was no telling which major league team was going to ask him to come play.

He thought about his parents and how old they were starting to seem. His father had started holding his lower back as he walked around the yard. His mother had slowed in the kitchen. He imagined leaving them behind and adopting a new life. He imagined living in an apartment in a ten-story building on a busy city street. He imagined taking a plane back to Kentucky for Christmas. How he would talk through dinner with the stories he had to tell.

From the truck, he got out a canister of ice water and poured a glass jar full, dumping it back in a series of long gulps. Dust on his hands turned to mud on the cold jar. His arms were sunburnt.

Mrs. Barton would ring the bell for breakfast in another hour. If his calculations were right, that would be about 70 piles of suckers from now. He stood back up into the sunlight, picked up his sickle, and started back at zero.

Wind came across the fields and disturbed the foliage of the Ash.

The tobacco gone now. The fields grassed over. Clumps of brush, gathered around the opening of the basin floors, gathered around the sinkholes' mouths like green goatees, a cool vapor seeping up from the underground. The fields rolled into a distant

tree line a quarter-mile beyond the side yard. The afternoon sun cast a pleasant light onto the dry, yellow fields. The farm stretched out from the house, the soil recuperating.

The final photo is of Dad standing on the edge of the fields of what used to be the Barton Farm. Just a moment later from the last. 3:50:01. This is Summer 07 114.jpg.

He wasn't aware that I snapped the picture. He was turned from the car, turned from me, facing out, looking across the land. His frame still so big, so strong. His arms still baked. The sunlight on his smooth head goes white in the photo's pixel distortion. A curtain of gray hair around the fringe of his otherwise bald head. He appears to be a healthy man of sixty.

I remember how hot the afternoon was. I remember stopping for drinks at the Dairy Queen's drive-thru before we drove out to the farm. It was one of those August, Kentucky afternoons where the sun is shining, but the sky loses its blue to haze. The sky so full of humidity that it takes on a uniform, bright white stratum, backlit by a blazing disc of sun that you can look directly at about an hour before sunset.

The photo verifies a white atmosphere draped over Barren County like a bed sheet.

That day I do not remember seeing a single tobacco plot. I had thought that if we did, I would pull off the road and see if Dad would want to step into the field for a moment. The market for burley tobacco dried up with grocery store smoking restrictions and Surgeon General crackdowns. Kentucky's wealth of burley tobacco farms that once numbered over one-hundred thousand dwindled down as farmers diversified their fields

into a wheat-corn-soybean rotation, trying to learn new disease threats and stay afloat in a changing industry.

After taking the last photo of the day, I remember walking up alongside Dad. His arms might have been crossed. When he was still strong and steady on his feet, I liked to stand with my hand resting on his shoulder, I would put my weight off onto him. He was so solid. It felt safe. I might have put my hand on him in that moment, prompting him on the old stories.

“Dad, tell me about working in the tobacco fields. Was it hot? Did your arms get sunburnt when you worked in tobacco?”

“Tobacco.” He smiled as he said it, and gave his head a single shake to the left and right. Then silence. The unnatural silence of the moment. This moment that we came for. I listened for emotion in his breathing. For memories that might spark.

“Dad, this is the old Barton farm. Do you recognize those sinkholes?”

The wind gusted and swirled into my ears. Dad didn’t say a word.

The Baptism of Oma Ray

When we made it down that stretch of Gap Hill Road to the bottomland of Dog Creek, the cars pulled off into the weeds. Aunt Oma was already out of her rusty, once-topaz Ford Tempo directing me.

Her voice quivered as she shouted, “Pull off right here.”

It was a commandment.

She stood in the middle of that nowhere road shouting at all the cars in this caravan. The way she was guiding traffic made me think she had come here before to scope the place out and imagine what the perfect version of this day would be like.

She had been eighty-and-never-saved. Now she was eighty and heaven-bound, and the reality of this new development gave her spunk, made her appear almost in a waltz, as if she were dancing as she signaled another driver to slow down and turn the wheel now. It was the way her feet slid, rather than stepped, her fragile, skin-and-bones body moving with a glide rather than a jolt.

“The Good Lord is *so--good*,” Brother Carl had said as he finished up the Sunday service fifteen minutes before back at Rugged Fork United Baptist Church. “Let’s all go down now and be a part of this miracle.” Upon this dismissal, little kids had run out the door at the back of the room. They were like thoroughbreds released from the starting gate.

Aunt Oma was almost as fast. She didn’t say, “I’ll see you there,” to Dad and me. She didn’t ask if we needed directions. She just went.

It had been Aunt Elva that called me a week ago to say Aunt Oma was saved. She told me about this revival up in Hart County that Aunt Oma had been going to and how Oma had insisted on going every single night. How even though Oma couldn't half see driving in the dark, she still went to Brother Carl's house one evening after church towards the end of the revival. How after she ate a piece of chocolate pie, they had gone into his living room to pray. She told me how Aunt Oma had said she got up and stomped her feet when it happened, like she just couldn't help herself. She told me about the baptism and she finished with, "Ya'll need to be there for your Aunt Oma next Sunday. It won't hurt you one bit. Bring Darrell, now, won't you?"

Even though Oma had run out of the church to be the first to the creek, it wasn't hard finding her. The only traffic in this green corner of Hart County seemed to be going down the hill. Aunt Oma fanned her hand really fast when she saw my car, directing me to pull up alongside her. I rolled the window down, the car idled. She put her hand onto my window seal like she was holding the car still, keeping me from driving away. She bent down, looked over me to the passenger seat at Dad, right into the eyes of her little brother. It was like she was giving a child an ominous warning, almost whispering a secret. "It's muggy out. Ya'll mind." Was she nervous? Was she thinking about how sharp the cold water was going to feel when Brother Carl laid her back into the creek like a dancer getting dipped?

Just ahead an overpass spanned the creek, and on the other side the land rose sharply from the bottomland into the woods. I pointed the nose of my car at the shallow

ditch and the car's axle boot let out a squeak that sounded like Dad's old brown rocking chair. The air conditioner fan hummed to rest underneath Dad and I as we tilted steeply towards the field.

"Put me in the corn," Dad said.

It was the first thing out of his mouth since we left the church. These stalks were not yet two feet high, certainly too young for ears or tops, but the corn was thick, thick enough to obscure the loamy soil of the valley, thick enough to make one think this was going to be a good year for harvest.

I stepped out onto that tar-bound road. The engines of the other cars went quiet, one-by-one, until all I could hear was the gurgle of creek water. A steady sound of Hart County, being pulled off to the ocean one granule at a time. The chirp of an Acadian Flycatcher was in a far-off tree, its voice waiting to swallow a passing insect. Sweat on my neck. The sun was shining between towers of cumulus. A shelf of haze floated over the bottomland, so thin it almost wasn't there.

Oma abandoned her car parking duties. Her long skirt swished as she hurried to be the first to the creek. She called over her shoulder to me, "Help Darrell, now."

I walked around the car and took my father's hand and helped him out of his seat. At first, we thought it was just a bout of depression. But then more. A new stutter to his speech. Hiding in the basement. Forgetting his way home one evening, and calling from a payphone finally saying, "Come find me." He kept talking less, forgetting more crumbs of information.

There was a washed out footpath that led steeply down to the creek bed. Dad took his time here and stepped down like he was newly learning to walk. The congregation from the church approached in twos and threes from their own cars and bottlenecked behind him. No one was impatient, though. Dad stepped down the ruts of eroded clay and over discarded RC and Nehi plastic bottles that had washed here in a rain.

Aunt Oma had made it down to the water and stood on the pebble bank watching everybody descend through the washed out little gulley, arriving at her baptism spot, as if they were climbing down onto a stage from a balcony. She wore simple clothes for the occasion—an ankle-length, navy blue skirt, skin-toned panty hose, and a white button-up blouse with long sleeves. It had a lacy collar. The white Tretorns on her feet contrasted with her dressed-up look, but these would protect her feet in the mud against the rocks. I thought it smart that she didn't wear jewelry—just her glasses that had always magnified her eyes, like an owl's, like a detective's, even when I was a kid and she babysat me. Like always, her glasses were slipping on her sweaty nose.

She never had done anything with her hair. For two decades, I had come to know the wash-dry-and-comb look of her. I hold this disheveled grey in my earliest memories. I remember her sitting with a TV tray on her lap, watching *America's Funniest Home Videos* on Sunday nights at seven, and her hair sticking up like she just got out of bed. But on this day, she wore barrettes just off her temples. She had on make-up too, a conservative shade of pink mauve, probably one touch of the brush on each cheekbone and a swipe of lipstick. She looked graceful.

Brother Carl was standing beside her at the water's edge. I didn't like thinking of him as Brother Carl, as if I were a member of this congregation, but it was all I knew to call him. He wore black slacks and held the same Bible he had read from earlier at the church. He had on a plain-white button down that was too big already, but he also let it hang too far out from the belt, so that it ballooned around his stomach. It looked like a marshmallow shirt. His hair seemed to be puffing in the steamy bottom.

Everyone gathered in a semi-circle at the bank. The congregation fell quiet. Voices decrescendo'd. A little boy flicked a pebble into the creek and the water *plooped* as it swallowed the stone. The boy's mother grabbed his shoulder and pulled him against her long denim skirt. Then just creek water. And bird sound. And a truck coming down the road towards the bridge, the sound of its tires like tape being pulled off of the roll. It was so humid the tar in the road might have still been liquid.

Brother Carl allowed these sounds to linger. Dog Creek lapped against the muddy bank. The pitch of the car engine heightening until it hit the joint of the bridge, then the Doppler switch of sound, a low pitch of horsepower as it disappeared into the woods and started climbing the hill on the other side of the bridge.

Maybe it was involuntary. It was as if she couldn't stand the anticipation any more. The silence must have lasted longer for her than for me. Aunt Oma stammered out, "I want to thank you all for coming," as if she were hosting the event.

Aunt Oma was still dry when it thundered. In the preceding moments, Brother Carl had led off with a prayer about how Oma spent her life waiting for this moment, how she had

devoted to praying for her salvation for decades, and how she surely deserved a mansion in heaven for her devotion to the Lord all these years. He ended his prayer and the congregation affirmed it all with a nod of their heads and a loud “Amen.” I heard Dad murmur “Amen” a second later.

Brother Carl talked to the congregation about how Aunt Oma had been the oldest person he had ever witnessed saved, and how it only got sweeter to watch with age. Aunt Oma blushed like she was receiving a compliment for something she had done right. He was talking about the night one week ago that Oma had come to his house to pray after an evening revival service.

“She was bent down, praying on the carpet in the living room when I saw the spirit of the Good Lord come over her,” he said. Brother Carl knew it was real by the way she smiled.

I wondered how the rest of Oma’s life got skipped over in this speech. I had seen the pictures of her, when she was in her twenties and thirties. Dad had told me years ago how she left town on an L&N train and moved to Louisville. How she worked for BellSouth, in a high-rise right downtown. In one picture I had seen, she was standing beside the Ohio River in a Derby hat. Behind her, the Indiana bank far off. She was in a crowd of laughing, smiling people. She held a drink—what must have been a mint julep.

In Louisville, she married and had a son, Danny. The son grew up, the marriage ended in divorce. I guess the job at BellSouth didn’t work out, either. Danny joined the Navy and wound up living in Jacksonville.

By the time I was born, she had been back home for twenty years. The Aunt Oma I grew up around was an old lady already from my child eyes. She took care of my Mammaw Strode and complained about her back hurting. She complained a lot. About the squash rotting in the garden, about the price of the gas bill. She had a dog named Poo-Kay that had sores all over his back. When Mammaw Strode died, Aunt Oma moved into a trailer out by the Denny Doyle Ballpark and lived there until she started wandering out into the road at night.

I grew up knowing Aunt Oma was going to hell. Mom and Dad often talked about it in the front seat of the Thunderbird on the way home from our church. "Poor old Oma, the Good Lord's going to let her die and go to hell," they would say returning home from a revival service.

I had watched at the summer revivals in my childhood as Aunt Oma sat in the women's corner at the front of church. People took turns sitting beside her, having illustrious conversations with her during altar calls. If they persisted long enough, she would go with them to the altar and pray. Year after year, she went to the altar and asked the Good Lord to save her. "Please Good Lord, why won't you save me?" she begged. She prayed out loud, and I heard her say this. But she never shouted then, never stood up and stomped her feet, and everybody knew when she raised her head from the bench that nothing had happened just from the look on her face.

And all of this had seemed so believable to me as a child. How could it not when Mom and Dad said so seriously that Aunt Oma was going to burn forever? But, now, out by the creek, I was thinking of the mosquito that zipped behind my ear. About this day as

a return to where I came from. About that particle of limestone that might be breaking free right now into the creek. How it will travel to the ocean. How it may deposit somewhere for a century and be one piece of millions in a sand bank where a fisherman will sit and sip a cold beer, where two will couple on an August night, where it will watch the seasons change. Until a spring flood will come and disrupt it, and then carry it on. Down the Dog Creek, down the Nolin and the Green to the Ohio. Past the industrial factory towers with their white steam rising out in the winter. Then the Mississippi, the Delta, how it won't even hear the blues as it rides along underwater, on through Natchez, and how it will taste saltwater someday in the Gulf. As Brother Carl went on, I thought about lunch and where Dad and I might drive-thru on our way back to Bowling Green. Overhead, the bottom of a cumulus cloud was growing dark. I looked up through the humid air. There were mosquitoes flying in circles over the creek. The cloud had a thousand puffs and stretched straight up. A dome of cirrus arced around its top.

It was the type of thunder that crackles first. Like wood splitting. Then, the boom. Close. The kind that makes you feel the electrons on the back of your legs. The kind that makes pinpricks on your shoulder blades.

The congregation headed for the underside of the bridge on instinct. Aunt Oma watched them walking away for a second, disbelieving. Then Brother Carl grabbed her hand and pulled her on towards the bridge.

Dad and I crowded under the bridge too, our shoulders pressed together. We were the same height. Even if his mind was growing weaker, I could feel the strength of his body still in his shoulder. He was always so strong.

The rain did not sweep in, like it does sometimes, when you can hear it coming up your street. Rather, the cloud above sprang a leak. Pregnant drops fell fat onto the rocks in quarter-sized bursts. Droplets beelined onto the creekwater and shot up bubbles to mark their landing. And then the bottom of the cloud fell out. Rain fogged us in. A congregation of strangers who loved my Aunt Oma under a little bridge. The boy who tossed the pebble. The Mom in her denim. Brother Carl and his whole flock. My father and me.

This crowd of three dozen or so acted on instinct. As if they all had the thought at the same time. How they all knew it would be that song. They sang so loud, so suddenly. And they sang over the backdrop of rain. Over the sudden cascade of water that poured down from the bridge like a left on water hose. More thunder. And the song bounced under the bridge against the cement and the pebbles and the creek water magnifying all of the voices. How they echoed! They sang so loud it swallowed the storm. And I heard Dad's voice in the refrain, keeping up with them. How he knew these words so well.

In the sweet

By and by,

We shall meet on that beautiful shore;

In the sweet

By and by

We shall meet on that beautiful shore.

How natural the words came off of his tongue. How I never knew before to listen to the way his voice sounded. Don't forget this, I said to myself in my head. Don't forget how he sounds when his voice is clear. When he isn't stumbling for his next word.

Remember how steady and in control he could be. How confident. How he talked to Tom at the barber shop when he took me on Saturdays to the Cave City square. How when Dad took his turn in the chair, Tom would pull his scissors away from Dad's head when he earthquaked with laughter. How on the way home I rode shotgun in his little blue Mazda pickup. How I put my head out the window and let the loose clippings blow out. How Dad would punch my knee in an ole'-sport fashion and say, so often, "you're a good boy."

There is One Thing that is Certain

The heat wave broke the night before Dad died. For two weeks, the evening news had led off with the same footage that might have been stock. A camera shot zooming into the sun. Five and six year olds running through spraying waters at the Russell Sims Aquatic Park—a mid-summer baptism in the fountains. An old lady hobbled behind a screen door, a reporter lobbing questions from the porch about what it's like to get by in this heat without AC. A farmer ankle deep in soybeans, gesturing an imaginary height just above his knee where the crop should have grown to by now.

The egg-headed weather man: “Believe it or not, we might actually hit 110 again tomorrow.”

Then, finally it rained. It came in the afternoon, when summer thunderstorms are at their best, and sat over town through the rush hour and just past dinner. The rain-cooled air lasted just long enough that the air conditioning units clicked off and rested. When the sun went down that night, steam rose off the quiet, gridded streets downtown and fog came up out of woods and sat on the treetops. Frogs came back out of their holes and croaked with the crickets through the evening.

The next day, Mom called at 1:32 in the afternoon. As I said hello I realized she was crying. I ran out of my office without saying goodbye, without telling anyone where I was off to. I knew exactly what I was running to, even though she had not said. Her voice—so quickly this call took place—only, “Come over.” And the way she said it, with a cry that was new, with surprise herself at the brevity of her statement.

Down the hill, to the car, pacing myself. I thought of myself as a distance runner, trying to pace my run so that I could maintain a steady speed all the way to the finish line.

I thought of myself as the non-athlete I am, looking as out-of-place in the act of running as flip-flopped George Clooney in *The Descendants*. I thought of traffic lights turning red and which route would be best to get across town at this time of afternoon. I thought about what pieces of work I would have to do in the evenings, between the funeral home and sleep, and what pieces of work could wait. I wondered if I would cry when I saw him. If I would be afraid to touch his skin.

The afternoon air was only in the 90s, a heat that felt right for early July. “Finally, we’ll not see triple digits today. Get outside and enjoy it while it lasts, folks.” The ground at last with water. The wilted leaves on the trees opening back.

My father, Darrell Dallas Strode, was born to Leslie and Frona Strode on August 6, 1946 in Cave City. Pappaw and Mammaw Strode’s only child together, Dad had eleven half brothers and sisters. Surviving brothers include Gene and Bill Strode, and surviving sisters are Ethel Poynter and Elva Dennison. Other siblings who have already passed include Marie, Mary Helen, Clifton, Jessie and Robert Strode, Grace Renick and Oma Ray.

Mom asked me to do it as if it were just another task on the checklist. The past two days had been a bottomless row of to-dos. There were thank you cards to buy, long-distance relatives to phone, his only suit to get dry cleaned. A casket spray to order (what colors?), the church to reserve (what time?), the cemetery to contact (which spot?). Mom didn’t have any black shoes, she said, so we set aside an hour to go to the Carnival Shoe Store. We had remembered everything, we thought, and the business and decisions of the

days kept our minds occupied. So the day before the funeral, when she asked me if I would write and read the obituary, I was surprised.

“Junior just called and mentioned something I haven’t even thought of. We still haven’t written the obituary for the funeral.”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “We just wrote the obituary yesterday for the paper.”

“That’s different.” She was adamant of this statement, and acted incredulous that I didn’t know that there were two obituaries. One for the paper. A second for the funeral. “Every funeral that I’ve ever been to somebody reads a longer version of the obituary.”

In my mind, a funeral was supposed to be custom-designed to the person it honored. Its planners were supposed to ask, “What would Darrell have wanted?” I saw this obituary as another necessity of the United Baptist tradition, that everything and everyone follows a script through the rites of life. Births, salvations, baptisms, weddings, funerals. They all look the same. Just substitute the bodies and the proper nouns, and time rolls on.

“I’ll do it. Of course I’ll do it.”

This had been my line for everything over the past few days. When Dad had to be moved into a body bag in the living room and the man from the funeral home needed a person to help, I said, “I’ll do it. I’m his son.” A leather bag. Browner than, but still maroon. Seven feet long. One long, heavy duty zipper. Heel to crown.

“I need you to roll him onto his side, and I am going to slide the bag halfway under him,” the man from the funeral home said. “When the body is first moved, it can sometimes behave... strangely. Aren’t you sure that someone else might not do this?”

I’ll do it.

Of all of the physical acts of helping my Dad over the years through the worst of his disease—rolling his still big-boned body from side-to-side for bathing every crack, crevice, and wrinkle, the complete strength of three people necessary to lift him out of the floor when he fell, holding his body upright in the last days that he could walk—there was no way I was going to stop now.

I wasn’t afraid.

I felt an obligation to Dad. I wanted to pick him up. I wanted to hold his hand as the zipper came up over his legs, over his hands. I wanted to hold him even though his skin no longer felt real now that it was cold. *I have to let go now, Daddy.* I wanted to carry him into his funeral. I wanted to carry him out to his grave. His son. Me. I needed to do these things. Dad needed to know that I was there until the very end. I needed to know that I didn’t give up on him.

What would Darrell have wanted?

Tradition.

“I will do it, Mom. Tell me what you want it to say.”

He grew up in this very church and was a member at Basil Chapel since he was saved at age 15. This church meant so very much to him. Until the end, Dad kept the kerosene lamp that his father carried in to light this building before it was wired. Here, he made

so many friends who loved him until the end. Dad made friends wherever he went and they were so important to him.

Dad went to the Bob Hunt Funeral Home in Cave City. This was Mom's insistence—that Dad go back to his hometown for the visitation. The Bob Hunt Funeral Home door was a time warp. It held on to its wood-grain panels, its sickly yellow and off-white wallpaper, like they were still vogue. Navy commercial-grade carpet. Wall hangings of smoky Jesus-with-the-lambs paintings. Pink and blue floodlights shining down onto Dad's bald head. But, despite the decor, laying him in his hometown was the right call. A steady stream of friends dating back to Dad's childhood streamed in through the evening.

A shy man named Billy came and introduced himself to me as a high school classmate of Dad's. He had thick glasses and an uneven haircut that made his hair feathery in patches. He looked so sincere when he told me that Dad was never mean to anybody, not the whole way through middle or high school. I doubted the truth in the statement, but there were tears in his eyes when he said it. He bit his lip to hold back from crying, remembering, perhaps, how cruel the bullying of kids can be. I shook his hand and wanted to hug this stranger.

There were people from the town who had known my Dad forty years ago. "This is Beatrice's daughter-in-law," Mom said, while I shook the hand of a maniacally smiling lady in a white dress. A man came up to me and put his hand on my shoulder and said, "I'm the nephew," and then walked away. People I didn't recognize and who didn't know me looked down at my Dad and talked about him to each other with such knowing. Who were they? What man did they know that I didn't?

I saw the aged faces of the church members I had known from every weekend of my childhood. When we stopped going to church fifteen years ago, I thought I had forgotten their faces, but now here they were again, and I knew them as well as ever. One of them said to me, shaking my hand repeatedly, “Darrell’s gone to place that neither you and I can’t even dream. There ain’t *no sorrow* no more.” He stretched out the “no sorrow” for emphasis, implying knowingness of exactly what Dad had been through.

“He had the sweetest thing, Derick. Darrell had it. He had the Good Lord’s favor and he’d been saved, and no matter of sickness can take that away. He’s in the Lord’s hands now.”

A man with pockmarked, red cheeks came up to me, held my hand, and told me how his family had given Dad his first job ever. “Les approached my dad, and he said, ‘my boy’s ready to work.’” I looked down at the man holding my hand. He held it just like we were boyfriends. He had a round belly that looked like it had a watermelon inside.

“So that’s what my daddy done. He gave Darrell his first job cuttin’ tobacco with us. We’d ride around the farm, and we’d tease Darrell. We’d say, ‘Darrell Dallas lost his gallus. Darrell Dallas lost his gallus.’” He patted me on the shoulder and walked away, clearly satisfied having shared this rhyme with me.

When Dad was in his early teens, he took his first job, working as a burley tobacco laborer. Dad found a love in farming that would never go away. His voice would still light up talking about the joy he found in farming, even as Alzheimer’s was taking away his last words.

Dad graduated from Caverna High School in 1966 and then attended Lindsey Wilson College and later Western Kentucky University. My father worked at a filling station at one point—a Texaco—and he was always brand loyal until the last Texaco station went out of Bowling Green. He later worked at factories, including Dart, Firestone, Country Oven Bakery, and Weyerhaeuser.

As I rode home from the funeral home, I kicked my shoes off. My feet were tired, achy, and damp with sweat. I rubbed them on the carpet of Mom's van and let the fibers tickle my foot.

“Mom, tell me what this obituary is supposed to say.”

“It's just a longer version of what you wrote for the paper. You're the writer in the family. Just give it some more detail.”

“I can't promise it's going to be religious then.”

She didn't respond, so I took this as a green light.

“Tell me about when you and Dad had your first date.”

In mid-August 1972, an important thing happened. Dad had his first date with my mother, Patsy Webb. They saw a movie at the Capitol Theatre in downtown Bowling Green. The Shaggy Dog. Afterwards, they went to Frisch's Big Boy out Russellville Road. Her mother and father approved. Likely they didn't know that my future-father parked their then-daughter at the end of the driveway to make out that night. But how could they not approve of him? Dad was charming his whole life through. He had a

warm smile, but most importantly, he had a giant, loving heart. On December 29, 1973 my Dad married my Mom.

Together, they had two children. Michelle was born in 1978 and me in 1981. We adored Dad. I remember making a Welcome Home banner for Dad when he went away once on a long business trip. We stood out on the carport of our Cave City home under streamers holding posters as he pulled into the drive. He was everything one could want in a father—a leader, sweet, with broad, strong arms that could sweep us up and hug us. We were an exuberantly happy family of four, and Dad a wonderful example not only in our home, but in our community too.

I printed the obituary—two pages—and folded it into my inner jacket pocket as we ran out of the house to the funeral the next morning.

The heat was back. 103 forecasted for a funeral. I was sweating. Nerves and heat met in my armpits. The egg in my head mimicking, “It’s back, gang. I hope you enjoyed those last two days because you won’t want to be outdoors this afternoon.”

I was hit with an urge to go back in time two days. I needed chores to accomplish. My mind kept flashing to images of Dad in the living room. Those quick moments when we waited for the funeral home to take him away. Me wanting to speed them up and pause them at the same time. I wanted him gone. I wanted him there forever.

I wanted someone to say, “Well here’s another thing to take care of. We need to...,” so I could leap in with an “I’ll do it.” I needed distraction. I needed purpose. I needed brain material and tasks. I kept thinking, *I am on my way to see him the last time.*

The minivan was full. My mother. My sister. Her boyfriend. My nephew. My niece. My wife. I drove.

We caravanned behind the hearse from the funeral home to the church. It was a gauntlet of memories. On the left, the Old Lexington Road leading out to the Barton Farm. On the right, the house where Mammaw and Pappaw Strode lived—the very house where Dad was born. As we rolled past in a too fast procession, I could picture Mammaw Strode out in the yard by a garden, her fat dog sniffing the ground around the cucumber vines. And onward we went, out the Griderville Road, that long, straight stretch of country highway, past a pay lake, then into a green tunnel beneath the summer trees. Dry beds of corn stalks stretched off on both sides, thirsting for another afternoon thunderstorm.

“Mom, tell us about the time Dad was in the car chase.”

“Oh. The time he and Oma chased that man out halfway to Hodgenville?” In the rearview mirror, I saw Michelle smiling at the memory of the story before it was told. Our family recycles a small catalogue of rich, short tales, but somehow this one hadn’t been told for a long time.

“Well Darrell and Oma had been out somewhere and they were in my Pontiac. My green Pontiac that I loved so much. You ‘orta seen it. It was a ’72, and it was the only new car I ever owned. I loved it. I don’t know why he took it over, but he was always driving that car when we got married.”

She recognized her diversion. “Anyways, they was driving home from Glasgow down the Griderville Road here when a car they met threw a beer bottle out the window and cracked the windshield. Of my Pontiac! So, Darrell turned around. And the way he

always told it was Oma took her seatbelt off and sat right up on the edge of her seat and kept slappin' the dashboard, cheerin' him on, and sayin', "Go Darrell. Faster! Catch him!"

My nephew was suddenly very interested. "How fast did they go?"

"They got up to 120." She paused just a second to let this sink in. "And right out here on this hilly little road."

"Did they catch him?"

"Pretty near. They followed him all the way to Griderville and got his license plate and called the police after him."

The memory of this story had been refined piece-by-piece through its retellings so that it was almost always told the same. I imagined Oma's bony hands smacking the dashboard. The look of determination in Dad's eye. The thrill down their backs. I thought about the adrenaline that Dad must have felt. How he might never have felt more alive than the day he gave chase.

My father was one of the fewer than 5% of Alzheimer's sufferers who show signs of the disease before age 65. Known as Early Onset Alzheimer's, Dad's first outward signs of the disease came in his late 40s.

Despite the disease's effects, so many wonderful things happened over the past 16 years since Dad has increasingly required care. His family has continued to grow around him—simply more people to love and support him. In 2003, his first grandchild was born, and then the second followed in 2005. Dad found a wonderful friend in his daughter-in-law, my wife, in 2010.

Dad has been loved every step of the way. Last night at the funeral home, I absorbed so many wonderful stories about my father from his many friends and from the family.

Thank you to each one of who are sharing memories of my father, and I hope you keep sharing them today.

When Dad forgot how to talk, I liked to pretend that he had stopped believing too.

Through a silent seepage of my own willpower, Alzheimer's created a father for me who shared my same worldview. It felt unnatural to take him back to the church. To put his body on the altar. To let the lid close for the last time in that place.

I carried the front-left side of the casket. When the church doors opened and we stepped inside, I felt as if the eyes of the church were on me. Here I was. Back. I wondered who I was exactly the last time I was in this building.

Since I had stopped attending Basil Chapel, I had supplanted a new life. Grown fifteen years older. A foot taller. Traveled. Gone to college. Married a girl with a wide-open mind. I had stopped believing in an isolationist sect of religion that everyone had told me was the only way my whole childhood. I had grown to accept myself and celebrate myself.

The obituary in my breast pocket suddenly felt so poorly worded. I wondered about Dad. What would he have said of himself? How much God would be in his own words? Like the churchman from the funeral home the night before, would Dad speak of himself in a jumble of holy clichés? I realized something that I did not like.

I didn't know anymore.

His warm, loving nature remained within him. Even as recently as this past weekend, he could still light up in a giant smile, he could still laugh and shake his whole body over. His kindness never went away. He was a big, gentle, lovable man.

There were two songs sung and then I was called forward to read. The lid was open. There he was. I stepped onto the pulpit, across that same dark pink carpet that had always been there. The only time I had ever been allowed on the pulpit was as a small child on the Saturdays when Dad and Mom would take their turn cleaning the church house. In that empty building, I would go into the ladies' room, feeling so out-of-bounds and loving the wrongness of it. On these days, I could go anywhere in the church. I could belly scoot under the pews and pretend to be hiding in battle. I could look on the shelves of the podium where the preacher stood. I could stand close to the painting of Jesus on the crucifix that hung at the front of the church and examine the drips of blood that ran down his arm and fell off his elbows and read the letters "INRI" on his cross.

From this pulpit, I had been taught there was only one way. There was only us United Baptists who knew it. I had been told that everyone else was going to hell. Our family sat on the third row on the right side of the church. My mother and father were looked in the eye by preachers and told during sermons that they had a responsibility to their children. They were told in front of everybody that it was their duty to make sure we grew up and carried this on.

Now the voice from the pulpit was mine for these next few minutes. The church listening to me.

My obligation to Dad measured with obligation to self.

To my left, in the amen corner, members of the church had gathered to sing the funeral's songs, and I felt them look up at me, expectantly. Behind me, three preachers sat on the one short pew at the head of the church. Their eyes staring into the back of my head, knowing that my obituary would come around to the right words at the end.

My mother showed her love for Dad over 31 years, but none as much as these past few when she has taken on the role as his full-time caretaker. Not very long ago, my mother told me that though it was difficult, she had never loved him more. She has proved this in her tirelessly devoted care for him. I went on reading. *There is one thing that is certain.* And then I paused. A long pause. Because I didn't realize the potency of this line when I had written it the night before.

There is one thing that is certain.

What is certain?

Dad, these are my final words to you. What do you want me to say?

I had sat at the bistro table in my house. It was a table I had bought second-hand from a ComAir pilot when I had lived in Cincinnati. I liked sitting there to write, in the high chair, where my feet could dangle free. The night before, I had been so certain of my words as I pecked them out. An homage to my Mom's unrelenting care. It was exactly what I should say. But now, here, with those people looking up at me, with those preacher-eyes peering into the back of me, my voice reverberating on those Basil Chapel

walls, getting eaten up by that pink carpet, I realized I might have written the wrong thing. Should I talk about God and heaven and being saved and certainty and add in the lines I had mused over my whole life through that people said out loud in prayers that have never made sense to me about being steadfast in service to the Lord and should I say that though it's hard everything's alright because Dad did all of these things and taught his children to pass it on and that we understood our responsibility? Should I?

This was it. The lid was about to close. These were my last words to him.

The eyes of the amen corner stinging me. I could improvise. I could say *There is one thing that is certain* _____ and satisfy them all. Maybe it would have satisfied Dad.

I stuck to the page.

There is one thing that is certain. Even as Dad lost abilities, he knew he was loved. This Tuesday afternoon, July 3, 2012, Dad passed away in his home in Bowling Green.

Adams, Amy. “Genes Can Cause Alzheimer’s Disease.” *GeneticHealth.com*.

Genetic Health, Inc., 8 Sept. 2000. Web. 8 July 2012.

The family tree/flow chart found at this site terrified me the first time I saw it. To tell the truth, it still does. It charts a man who develops Alzheimer’s disease (AD) at age 50, showing that two of his three children will also develop AD at an early age. Genetic inheritance of early onset AD is staggeringly high.

The fact is that genetic testing exists right now that could determine if I have one of the three mutated genes that cause early onset AD. One of them very well may be inside me doing its evil as I write.

As I wrote the essays that make up this body, I contemplated whether to write in glimpses of my own struggle to-know-or-not-to-know. I chose not to explore this vexing question explicitly. However, this first source that I found, and the other subsequent readings I have done on the genetics of early onset AD since, have started shaping so much of what I do. The truth is that I am living my life now as if I am going to get the disease. For example, I am planning for retirement at age 49. The risk entertains my wife’s and my discussions on whether or not to have kids. I buy blueberries at the grocery—which I don’t even like—and throw back a handful with breakfast each morning for their antioxidants (said to be good for combating AD). My risk is also another additive that makes me care so much about my father’s experiences. What if it’s my fate too? This question lives behind the words of every essay. I am currently considering genetic counseling.

Block, Melissa. “Alzheimer’s Research Advocate Tom DeBaggio Dies.” *National Public Radio*. Nat’l Public Radio, 22 Feb. 2011. Web. 2 July 2012.

At first dubbed “An Alzheimer’s Journey,” and then later just a periodic check-in, NPR set Tom DeBaggio’s story as a home base for AD coverage over the course of twelve years. This last and most recent installment of the nine-part series houses links to the entire series. DeBaggio was diagnosed in 1999 with Early Onset AD and died at age 69 in 2011. These recordings provide over 90 minutes of auditory resource that tells DeBaggio’s (a similarly-aged man to my father) story through voice and decline from not only his own interviews, but also from the voices of his wife/caretaker Joyce and son Francesco. I have revisited this series many times while writing. In fact, I was listening to one of the recordings when that 1:32 PM phone call came from my Mom. It always cues a new memory as I hear DeBaggio’s painstaking, slowing speech and thought process over the years.

Calvino, Italo. *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. Trans. William Weaver. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc, 1979. Print.

My reading of literature simultaneous with my writing had a constant effect on my authorship of these pages. As an example, in the opening of *Back to the Farm*, I address the reader directly and repeatedly. This narrative voice, and even to a degree the fragmentation of that passage, are directly linked to my reading of Calvino’s novel at the time.

Country Oven Bakery. Job evaluations and disembarkment materials for Darrell D. Strobe. 29 June 1981- 10 August 1995. TS.

After I told my mother that I was going to write about Dad losing his job at Country Oven Bakery, she handed me a manila folder one day not much later and said, “I think you might like to see these.” She had found them in the garage in Dad’s things. My father’s hoarding had paid off. In the folder were form on top of form that served as the framework for *Foreclosure*. The passages within that essay about my father were excerpted verbatim from what I read in job evaluations that went back to 1981, his first year on the job, and later documented a sudden rise and seemingly inexplicable series of behaviors in the early 1990s. Also in the folder was a document from the consulting firm McLaughlin Young of an evaluator’s opinion of my Dad and a paper-clipped bundle of papers that included the legal documents my father had to sign the day the company called him in to let him go. My own evaluations—both from the consultant and Lehman, Singer, and Rossman (a modified name of the real company)—were imagined to mirror my father’s work life with my own corporate year.

DeBaggio, Thomas. *Losing My Mind: An Intimate Look at Life with Alzheimer’s*.

New York: Free Press, 2002. Print.

DeBaggio, Thomas. *When It Gets Dark: An Enlightened Reflection on Life with*

***Alzheimer’s*. New York: Free Press, 2003. Print.**

Both of these books are written from DeBaggio’s own first-person point of view as he went through the early and middle stages of the disease before he lost all ability to write and record his thoughts. It is hard to slough through these books. As interesting as DeBaggio’s story is, his disease-induced limitation to craft a narrative framework to support it is obvious.

“Family photos from the visit to the Barton Farm, 2007.” File last modified on 15 Aug. 2007.

I used family photos to help provide vivid details to otherwise smoky memories. In *Back to the Farm*, I played with the details of digital family photos as a source of meta-commentary to talk about the trouble and tricks of memory. I use three photographs as a frame for telling the essay. These photos serve as a point to root the essay in specificity, while the rest of the essay is given some freer license to be less reliable.

But in a broad scale, there are so many unmentioned photographs that subconsciously shape the image I keep of my father before his AD. I was only in middle school, after all, when he was let go of his job and showed the first outward signs that something was wrong. I have lived longer with a father *with* AD than without. While I like to think my memories of him before then are sharp, the truth is that seventeen years is a long time. Many of my vivid memories of his life are shaped by the piles of family snapshots stored in shoeboxes in my parents’ house.

“Mammoth Cave National Park.” Map. *Google Maps*. Google, 4 June 2011. Web. 4 June 2011.

I wanted *place* to play a central role in my essays. To this end, I had to familiarize myself with the Mammoth Cave National Park area increasingly as I wrote more and more. My mother grew up on the park’s northwest border, my father on the park’s east. I have lived the vast majority of my own life within an hour’s drive of the park. But, I needed to draw in the details. What I could not remember myself from growing up in the

area, I found on maps. I found proper nouns like Chester Escarpment to go with geographic features that I knew by sight.

Mantel, Hillary. *An Experiment in Love*. New York: Picador, 1995. Print.

In the midst of her novel, there is suddenly the author's voice: "I would like to press on now [. . .] But if I hurry I will lose the thread" (50). This line, and others like it within *An Experiment in Love*, gave me significant inspiration as I struggled with the great task of orchestrating a narrative. Mantel effectively breaks down the not-spoken-of wall that exists between fiction writer and reader, and for a moment, converses directly with her audience. In the writing process, there is so much material to juggle. I learned that in my own process, I could not possibly deliver all of the details I wanted to. I struggled with questions such as, how does one get to the point of an essay, but not too soon? How does one deliver a message without spelling its meaning? How does one slow down to draw the reader in without losing the "thread?" How does one decide what to omit and what to put in? Mantel slipped nuggets of meta-commentary on her own writing process into her novel. I tried something similar in *Back to the Farm*, as I worked on delivering some commentary on the agonizing trouble with memory and its irregularity across time and different points of view.

"Mini Mental Status Examination." Evaluation. Familyrightsassociation.com.

Family Rights Association, 6 June 2011. Web. 9 July 2012.

This quick, easy-to-administer, cognitive examination is often one of the first tests done when Alzheimer's disease is suspected. Through a series of verbal questions and commands—for example, asking the patient to spell the word "WORLD" backwards and

name common objects in the room, like a pencil and wristwatch—the loss of cognitive functionality can be measured.

Richey, Nancy. *Barren County*. Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2010. Print.

This Cracker Barrel-audience book became a surprising source for history and facts about rural Barren County as I wrote “Back to the Farm.” Consider this. In 1997, Kentucky had 93,530 tobacco farms. By 2007, the state was down to only 16,234 such farms. This collection of the county’s history entertained and informed my own roots in the county, helping me tell the story of the place my Dad and I were both born.

Strode, Patsy. Personal interview. 22 May 2011.

When I conceived the idea of writing about my father’s Alzheimer’s disease for my thesis, I imagined myself an investigative journalist, interviewing the people who had known my father closest, and arranging their thoughts into one masterful ode to my father. My very first interview was with my mother. She was full-time caretaker for my father in a house that was full of distractions. I asked my wife to stay with my Dad for an hour or two while I got Mom out of the house to do the interview.

Mom and I drove down to Basil Griffin Park, sat in my car in a parking lot between the paddle lake and a little league field, and I asked her questions over the course of an hour.

I recorded the conversation on a cassette tape.

I had counted on conducting interviews with Michelle about her childhood memories of our Dad, with Dad’s surviving siblings, with friends from Dad’s church, his former co-workers, and even the bosses that fired him. I thought that I could comb the collective archives of their memories and draw it all together.

That day at the park, I realized that I was envisioning something impossible. My mother's memories scarcely matched up to my own. At best, she remembered things differently than I did. Often, she seemed not to know what I was talking about as I inquired about a memory of my own that I wanted to write about. It became clear that my thesis had to be *my* story of my father, not others'.

***The Notebook*. Dir. Nick Cassavetes. New Line Cinema, 2004. Film.**

As both a popular novel and a widely-seen film, *The Notebook* is perhaps the most widely-recognized portrayal of AD in popular culture today. Painting the disease in the rosiest of manners, one might believe that AD includes only an innocent forgetfulness, made OK by a patient relative nearby to remind the diseased of bygone days of young love. The movie's portrayal of the disease falls well short of reality, but it was important to me in my writing to keep in context the limit of what some readers may perceive AD to be.

Thompson, Phyllis Hoge. "This is the Story I Heard: A Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston and Earll Kingston." *Biography* 6.1 (1983): 1-12. *Project Muse*. Web. 20 February 2012.

Maxine Hong Kingston said in this interview, "I think there's something wrong with oral histories. People are treating them like *sacred* material when what they are is *raw* material. Yet after you've shaped the material and written it, there's always someone who'll say, 'This obviously isn't authentic... it's been shaped'" (6).

Let there be no mistake about what I have written... these essays have been *shaped*. I realized early on in the process that this would have to be the case. First off, as a creative

non-fictionist, I don't want to be seen as an oaf, thinking that my life is all that fascinating. I know that while it may be to me, it isn't to other people. Kingston speaks in this interview about the labeling of books as fiction and non-fiction and takes adamant pride in the fact that her writing lands squarely between those labels. *Woman Warrior*, which is a first-person account of her parents' immigration to the USA is highly imagined and invented, but is still autobiographical and shelved as non-fiction.

This interview transcript nailed down for me that it was OK to enforce the *creative* elements in a creative non-fiction thesis and not feel the necessity to adhere to a rigid label. Kingston's words gave me the confidence to take liberty with sharing memories.

WKU Graduate Studies and Research. "Authorization for Use of Thesis, Specialist Project & Dissertation." *wku.edu*. Western Kentucky University, 28 Mar. 2011. Web. 9 July 2012.

Before class one evening in the spring semester 2012, a classmate who was just completing her thesis and defense showed me the paperwork she was turning in to the university as we sat in a Cherry Hall corridor. Among the papers due to the Graduate Studies office was a waiver. Publication to TopScholar—the university's online, scholarly repository—is compulsory for all graduate-level thesis writers. I realized then, as I was very much in the process of constructing my own thesis, that my conservative relatives will be able to read my essays with a simple web search soon. The contract's embargo choices of one year, 18 months, two years, or three years is hardly satisfying. Eventual inevitable online publication on TopScholar became a bond of anxiety and censorship for what I wrote.

